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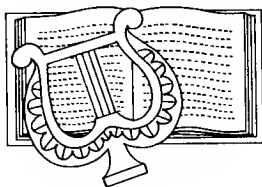
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# BEATEN ON THE POST.



## CHAPTER I.

### THE MASTER OF ALCASTON.

‘WELL, doctor, how is she?’ The speaker was a tall, stalwart man, of perhaps five-and-thirty, who sat at an oval library-table littered with books and papers, two or three pair of spurs, a handful of faded flowers, and some loose cabanas straggling over from a half-overtured box, while a racing-saddle was thrown carelessly down by his side.

He had been sitting with his handsome, curly brown head buried in his hands, and as he raised it at the somewhat noisy entrance of fussy little Dr. Monckton, traces of a long and weary vigil were seen on his pale face, the purple shadows under the clear grey eyes and somewhat heavy eyebrows making them shine brightly with a troubled look of eager anxiety. Moreover, the tremulous tones of his voice told a sympathetic ear that the speaker had a load of black care at his heart, which the medical man’s reply would either dissipate or render still more weary of burthen.

The man at the table was George Welford, the owner of

the fair manor of Alcaston, a portion of which, stretching away into the blue distance, in the shape of a grand old park, could be seen from the windows. These, level with the trimly-kept lawn, were thrown wide open, allowing the beds of luxuriant flowers blazing in the June sun to fill the room with the subtle essence of their sweetness. The musical plash of a fountain fell upon the ear with soothing cadence, chiming harmoniously with the full, rich notes of a thrush, singing from the top of one of the great cedars that swept the lawn with their spreading branches, making up a drowsy yet delightful volume of sound, fully in accord with the freshness of the summer's morning. The interior of the room either denoted utter carelessness on the part of its occupant, or else that 't' master,' as the whole of the household were in the habit of calling him, had, for the last few days, forbidden unwelcome intrusion upon his sanctum. The bronzes on the mantelpiece were covered with dust—dust lay on the mahogany table. The door of the gun-rack was wide open, while three or four trout-rods, in their cases, had fallen from their accustomed corner, and lay unheeded where they fell.

Carelessness was not one of the faults of the head of the house—although, Heaven knows, he had many—at any rate, carelessness of his 'tools,' as he was wont to call rods and guns. No man rode out to the meet of the foxhounds on his big chestnut, Blazer, more nattily got-up than he. No man was keener as to the welfare of his favourite 12-bore double after a hard day with the longtails. Kind to a fault to his dependents; wilfully trustful to others in business details, when he should have looked after them sharply

himself ; open-handed, valuing money not an atom ; upright, honourable, and fearless ; a reckless, foolish gambler on the racecourse ; true to his friends, untrue to himself—such was George Welford. Loved by everyone, and envied by not a few ; yet with no man to say of him ‘ he’s mine enemy.’ So, on this lovely June morning, the heaviest trouble that this big, careless man had yet experienced had come home to his hearthstone, and, fearless as he was, he was yet in this matter a very coward, and trembled and cringed at the bare possibility of the impending stroke.

He had married a girl much beneath him in social position. That he didn’t care a button about, but simply felt and knew that he loved her with the first overwhelming passionate love of a powerful nature. He sought to know nothing further ; cared very little for certain disparaging shrugs of the shoulder he now and again had to antagonize, and, as he said, all social distinctions might go to the devil. She, a lovely woman, or girl rather, just budding into womanhood, first said ‘ No !’—flatly, resolutely, ‘ No !’—backed up in her determination by the advice of her father, a sound-principled man, who, listening to neither argument nor explanation, could see only that George Welford’s love was a transient feeling, the passing passion of a gentleman for a poor girl, and that in the future Time, like the shifting clouds after a thunderstorm, would obliterate this love, with the result that his girl’s happiness would be fatally stranded. You see, he knew nothing of George Welford’s idiosyncrasies, therefore he was perfectly justified in the assumption. ‘ T’ master,’ however, was not the man to accept ‘ No.’ It is very questionable indeed if he knew what it meant, so that



he went again to his love, and pleaded with such impassioned fervour—such a wealth of true manly honesty ringing in the trembling tones of his firm yet mellow voice—that upon the second occasion the girl whimpered, sobbed out, the fair brown head drooped, and, all in due time, humbly born yet lovely Mary Cope—but for all that a lady, mind, from head to heel—became Mary Welford, the mistress of Alcaston Hall, Marlsire; at the same time the recipient of a terrible amount of female spite and jealousy from her former friends and associates, and a still larger amount of hatred and dislike from those among whom she became an equal.

George laughed at it all, when she came to tell him of some fresh exhibition of catlike feminine spite, gave her ten kisses, causing a bright light to dance in her clear blue eyes, and thus matters of the kind were wont to end; while presently high, low, rich, and poor alike came to the conclusion that George had made a very happy choice, while everyone loved and honoured Mary for her innate goodness.

At the time at which this history commences, the near approach of that hour of woman's greatest trial was at hand, and George Welford's wife had gone through sore travail. So much so, that at one time her strength had been terribly exhausted, and she had lain like a bruised lily beaten down by a hurricane, with life barely flickering in her frame.

'Absolute quiet, absolute quiet and rest,' had been Dr. Monckton's stern behest.

Thus the household had been religiously hushed—not a footfall was heard; the restless, miserable husband, banished from the upper regions, taking refuge at last in his own neglected snuggery—and thus we find him.

‘How is she, my dear sir?’ echoed the cheery little man, in reply to the anxious question that forms the heading to our tale. ‘How is she? Why, how should she be, with me to look after her? Right as a trivet, sir: right as forty trivets, for that matter! But, bless my soul and body, I forgot! Allow me, my dear Welford, to congratulate you. You’ve a son, my dear sir—a son—think of that!’ and the doctor’s merry grey head wagged solemnly, while the merry black eyes twinkled with exuberance of friendly feeling.

‘Thank God, doctor!—may I go to her?’ cried the big, strong man on the other side of the table, in a half-choked voice, while at the same instant he rose, and crushed the soft, white hand extended to him in his powerful grasp in such a fashion that poor Dr. Monckton winced again; while George’s voice trembled with suppressed emotion, and he tried hard to keep back the tears that would fain well up to the grey eyes. ‘Forgive me half a moment, old friend; I’m a big fool, I know, but I can’t help it—for I love her dearly.’

Thus George Welford—the next instant he hastily strode out upon the lawn, and, seeking solitude, pushed through one of the shrubberies, whither we will not follow him: while the little doctor busied himself with looking over the weights for the Great Blankshire Handicap, lying on the table before him. Time rapidly winged its way, and soon a long shadow blotted out the sunlight from the open window, falling across the page which Monckton was perusing, and ‘t’ master’ re-entered the room.

‘Giovanni’s well in here, Welford! Are you going to run him?’ queried the little doctor, roused from his task by see-

ing that the sunlight came in again, and that the master had resumed his seat.

‘Oh, bother the horses, Monckton ! I’ve something else to think of just now. Do you think I may go up to her?’

‘Far better not, my friend—far better not ; she’s had no easy time of it, I can assure you. She’s asleep now, and it’s a wondrous healer is sleep—an extraordinary healer—beats all the medicines ever manufactured into a cocked-hat. Come, give me a cigar and some claret, and we’ll have a chat.’

Welford rose from his chair, and ringing the bell, gave the necessary orders to the man-servant who came in, and soon the fragrant incense of the weed was circling round the snug room.

‘I’m going to beg a day on the stream shortly, my friend,’ said the doctor, as he settled himself comfortably in the soft cushions of the armchair, surveying his cigar critically and with half-closed eyes.

He was a keen hand with the fly-rod was old Monckton ; indeed, he was up in every department of Izaak Walton’s mysterious craft, and nothing gave him greater delight than to get to the well-stocked and carefully-preserved trout stream, a tributary of the Swash, that rippled and brawled through the park and meadows of Alcaston.

‘You’re heartily welcome whenever you please, Monckton, you know that—and I’ll tell you what,’ said the master, evidently trying hard to battle with his roused feelings, ‘I saw a grand fish, a three-pounder if he was an ounce, rise the other day—why, of course, yesterday it was—by the second little bridge.’

‘God bless my soul! you mean that!’ vociferated the doctor, jumping up in his excitement. ‘I do hope and trust you noticed what fly was on?’

‘Oh, I did not stay puzzling my brains about that, my dear fellow,’ replied the other, smiling faintly; ‘I was on my way to see Rosebud and her foal—the grandest colt, doctor, that I’ve seen for many a day—and never bestowed another thought on the trout. By-the-bye, you’d better run over rather earlier to-morrow; I’m going to arrange a gallop with Tatham, and get to know how the old horse is—we’ve got Kingfisher back again, you know, and if he can give him the necessary weight, and beat him over a mile and a half, why the handicap is as good as in my pocket. Will you come? and then you can try the trout afterwards, and have a bit of dinner with me—do, now; it’ll be an absolute charity.’

‘Yes, I’ll come—hang it, the temptation’s so great that I can’t help it; in fact, though I quite expect some of these days to hear that that ass of mine, young Burrows—dear me, what an ass that fellow is to be sure!’ he soliloquised; ‘doesn’t know a green drake from a midge, or a yellow sally from a furnace hackle—has given somebody or other laudanum instead of squills for the baby. Then I shall get called over the coals tolerably decent, I suppose; be told that I’ve mistaken my vocation, ought to be punting folks up the Thames, and going out with cockneys gudgeon-fishing instead of being the Alcaston medico. By gad, I’d rather a deal be a Thames puntman, too, if I had the chance, and could make enough to keep body and soul together—devilish happy life, I should think!’ and here the doctor laughed out

a muffled, chuckling kind of roar, as though the idea of his punting gudgeon-fishers to a pitch had fairly tickled his fancy. But then as young Burrows, and his utter inability to distinguish a green drake from a midge, with the highly possible chance of his some day poisoning a baby, came across his mind, his merry face clouded over, and Burrows was evidently an abomination in the doctor's eyes barely capable of toleration. 'Well, I must be off now, Welford. I've a dozen calls to make. Brown's children have got the measles beautifully ; eight of 'em—isn't it lovely ? Children's diseases are a mystery to me altogether. Curious thing about that family now. Everlastingly ill with one thing or another, although they're all of them big, bumping children, too ; while Briggs's brats—narrow chested and thin as rats—go through the world without an ache or a pain. Good thing, though, for me, because Brown pays well, and Briggs doesn't. No, don't disturb yourself, pray,' he added, as the master rose to ring the bell. 'I'll just run round and see the mare put to myself, and be over by nine in the morning. Will that be early enough ? Good. No fuss, mind, no *pâté de foie gras*, swell soups, or rubbish of that sort, if you please. Now, good-bye ; and whatever you do, don't go worriting upstairs. Hallo ! hold hard !' he added, as he drew on his gloves, 'I want a light for my weed !' and the little man shook his friend heartily by the hand, and went out. He turned back, however, on the point of closing the door, to say, as he noticed the other's anxious look—'Well, I don't know ; perhaps you might just go up for a moment when I'm gone. I shall run up again before I start, to see that she's all right ; hope to goodness she won't smell the

smoke. Ought to be kicked, by George ! but no noise, mind, and none of your loving humbug ! Yah, bosh !' he cried derisively, yet with a hearty look and smile, and the door closed softly.

Silence reigned supreme in the room, latterly echoing with the busy chat of the talkative little man, broken only by the distant bay of the hounds in the Alcaston kennels, and the low cries of the cattle in the straw-yard. Silence, save for the indefinite hum of insect life always attendant upon a hot, drowsy atmosphere, amidst which Welford sat, buried deep in thought. Suddenly a noisy, joyous peal of bells rang out upon the still air. He sat listening, and wondered for a moment who could be married in the little village. Then he recollected that he had a son, and that it was probably in honour of the birth of his first-born that the village bells were clashing and clanging with musical voice, and instantly a holy feeling of thankful joy filled his heart, mingled with a great yearning to see his child and its mother, and he rose to go upstairs.





## CHAPTER II.

### MOTHER AND SON.

HE went slowly up to his wife's room, up the broad old-fashioned staircase with its wide polished steps and heavy carved handrail, the walls gloriously panelled in black oak, and enriched with many a group of fruit and flowers, chased by some bygone master's hand. Past the magnificent stained glass window that looked out upon the park, with its groups of valuable timber dotted here and there over the broad expanse, the trees clothed in all the grand beauty of an English summer. Next he noted dreamily, as he passed, the scores of rabbits peeping out from their burrows, or scuttering, with white tails aloft, across the emerald slopes to shelter. Noted the groups of hothouse plants that stood upon stands and in the embrasure of the sunny windows; and so, with his heart full of a strange longing to look upon the last and best of his possessions—the face of his newly-born child and its mother—he went quietly upwards on his way to his loved one's room.

No one, save himself, knew how dearly he loved his wife—his first, only love. It was a love that perhaps one man in a thousand experiences, because it was pure, steadfast,

and holy, devoid of passion, yet true as the most elastic steel—a love that, springing perhaps from unbridled fancy, had become purified by contact with his young wife's glorious chastity, by the perfection of her every virtue as exemplified by her contact with the world, types of purity of both mind and heart that had shone unsullied as the first wintry snowfall gathering on the peak of a mountain. Thus, despite the doctor's cheerful prediction, the husband's face yet wore a cloud of doubt and anxiety, hard to be dispelled, as he thought of her late dire peril.

At the door of the room where his wife lay, he was met by an old lady—his mother—and whom to look at was to love at once, so beautiful was she, even with the snow of many winters frosting her hair, the hand of Time nipping and sharpening her features. With a slight stoop in the shoulders, she was supporting herself on a crutch-handled stick as she met him at the door, hearing and knowing the fall of his foot, as he trod lightly along the carpeted lobby, while raising at the same time a warning finger.

'Hush, my son! Mary is asleep—God bless her!--and your boy as well!' and words can hardly describe the proud tremor of her voice as she spoke of her grandson.

'Mother mine,' he whispered, stooping and kissing the sweet serene face of the old woman—a face which, with all its many puckers and wrinkles, seemed beautiful in its very age, while he smoothed the silver hair which, brushed back from the forehead, was confined with a broad band of black velvet, surmounted with a rich lace cap—'Mother mine, I must see her, I cannot rest; one peep, and I'll be off.'

Grandmother smiled, and half shook her head in answer



to this appeal, while her son crossed the big room—richly and luxuriantly furnished—to where his wife and child lay, and softly, without a rustle even, drew the lace curtains of the bed. Very quiet, very white, yet with one pink spot where the warm rosy blood mantled to the fair pale cheek, Mary Welford lay—the exquisite profile, like that of an ancient Greek statue, being defined clearly by the shadow of the curtains. A faint, hardly defined expression of suffering yet hung around the curves of the rosy mouth, while a wealth of fair brown hair, loose and unconfined, strayed in careless luxuriance over the drapery of the pillows. One arm—the left—was stretched out, the taper fingers peeping from under the coverlid, close to him, as he stood watching her. A simple gold circlet shone dully on the third finger—she would never wear any other ring than this—and, as he stood looking at the fair face, his big, brave heart throbbed painfully, and tears gathered afresh in his eyes—thankful tears, too—as he thought how narrow and cramped his lot in life would have surely been in the future had it pleased the Good Shepherd to have called his dearly-loved wife home to the Fold.

Possibly no one can imagine his feelings ; assuredly none of his friends would have credited careleßs, blithe-hearted George Welford with such a tumult of contending emotions as surged within his bosom ; while presently, as he stood watching her, the blue eyes slowly opened, as though she had instinctively felt her husband's presence, and a pained smile wreathed the pale lips.

‘My husband!’ she faintly murmured, while a rosy flush mantled the waxen cheek.

‘My darling!’ he rejoined, and with the glad salt tears

welling up in his eyes, he stooped and fondly kissed the pallid face.

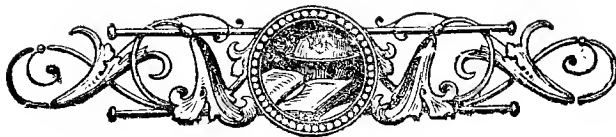
‘See, George—look!’ she said in faint, eager tones, and turned down the bed-linen to show him where a tiny, dusky head lay nestling close to her fair bosom. ‘Kiss my little son—your baby boy!’ she proudly added; ‘and ask God to bless him and make him a good man.’

A father’s first kiss was printed on the little fluffy head; then silently, with an honest impulse without a trace of cant in it, but simply because his heart was very full, the strong man bowed his head over his wife’s outstretched hand, and offered up to his Maker—perhaps not often approached in prayer—an earnest invocation for the welfare of the son just born to him, for the mother whose place in his heart was so deeply seated that he, and he alone, knew what would have been his sense of desolation if she, whom he so dearly loved, had bidden him good-bye.

A quarter of an hour elapsed, the silence only broken by the ticking of the timepiece, the cawing of the rooks that were circling over the tall trees, the distant lowing of cattle, standing up to their hocks in the clear, cool water, or sheltering under shady trees from the fierce June sun, and as he raised his head—his heart all the lighter, perhaps, for a clumsy, yet honest prayer—he saw she again slumbered. He rose softly, and crossed the room on tiptoe to where his mother sat.

‘Will she do, mother?’ he whispered.

‘Yes, my son; with God’s help, she’ll do famously,’ said the old lady in sweet, silvery tones. ‘And now go down, there’s a good lad—I must have no more talking—and tell Sally I want her.’



### CHAPTER III.

#### TATHAM'S OPINION.

A GLORIOUS June morning was that, as the master of Alcaston, with unclouded brow, sauntered out of the morning-room of the old hall on to the lawn clean and close shaven as to its grass as a billiard-table, and, after whistling his dogs, lighted a cigar, and prepared to wend his way to the stabling.

The air was vocal with melody from hundreds of the glad-voiced tribe of feathered songsters which make an English summer's day a long chorus of music.

The sun, struggling through a thick, hazy atmosphere, had as yet little power, though the air was heat-laden, and the flowers exuded a heavy, almost sickly perfume, as no breath of air stirred them, and the exhalation swayed in great waves of sweetest odour above the many-coloured parterres.

The rooks with heavy wings were circling over the tall trees of the avenue yonder, down which the master of this fair domain wended his way, accompanied by handsome old Chance—a favourite Clumber, with long, silky yellow and white coat, and pendulous, feathered ears—who, frisking by

the side of a big, smooth-skinned bull-terrier, his constant companion—Tom by name—ever and anon ran on ahead, vigilantly hunting every new-found patch of underwood and fresh bit of cover in quest of rat or hedgehog.

Soon a long low wall was reached, skirting the stable, and passing through a door built into it, the master was at once in the middle of a trimly-kept garden. Early peas and strawberries were there, and tremendous vegetable-marrows coming on ; overhead the arching boughs of jargonel pears and ribston pippins formed a welcome shelter.

} ‘Good-morning, Mrs. Tatham ! I see you’re busy, as usual,’ cried the master cheerily.

\ This was addressed to a comely woman in clean print gown, and cheeks as red as her own strawberries, who was washing a great boiling of potatoes in a wooden sieve at the pump.

‘Is your husband in his room ?’

‘Yes, he is ; and here’s wishing you joy of your son and heir ; and I am sure, if he’s like his father, he’ll be a pattern to the country-side.’

‘Ah ! many thanks,’ laughed cheery, big-voiced George Welford. ‘But you are really too complimentary for so early in the day. By-the-bye, I want everyone to have some little memento of my son’s birth ; will you therefore oblige me by buying a new bonnet for the christening ?’ and a couple of sovereigns were slipped chinking into the out-stretched palm.

Then he made a bolt for the interior of the pretty jessamine and honeysuckle covered cottage to escape the shower of voluble thanks dealt heartily out by the grateful woman.

Removing his hat as he entered his trainer's sanctum, he saluted him with a hearty 'Good-morning, Tatham.'

'Mornin', sir,' replied the trainer curtly; and these were the mutual salutations.

It is worth while to give a little description of the man before us—a bit of a character into the bargain—and here he is. He was something over five feet in height (a dwarf beside the other man), natty in dress and appearance, and owning a face with mutton-chop whiskers adorning it. These were originally black, but were now slightly grizzled, while his face looked as though it were carved out of dark Spanish mahogany; keen, greyish-hazel eyes, deep set, and twinkling like the terrier's that lay in the sun at his feet; a blue and white birdseye silk neckerchief folded neatly round the spare, thin throat, and tied with a trim bow; no shirt-collar visible, though spotless linen showed under the high-buttoned waistcoat; a Newmarket-cut coat, fitting like a glove; bandy legs, encased in tight Bedford cords, that looked like gripping a horse's ribs like grim death.

Such was the personal appearance of the trainer Tatham—on foot a cripple from chronic rheumatic attacks, on the back of his cob an equestrian Beau Brummel. As honest as the sun to his employers, 'cute, cool, and clear-headed, reserved in speech, not over-confident, yet when he could be prevailed upon to make a prediction about any of the horses under his charge, it was found that there was usually good reason for it; moreover, it was sure to be very near the mark. He possessed a soul-absorbing passion for a thoroughbred, and filled his position as trainer to Welford's small racing establishment with satisfaction to the owner of the horses, and not a little to his own.

The room was neatly furnished, with cocoa-nut matting on the floor in lieu of carpet ; the walls were hung with sporting prints—here Eclipse, Colonel O'Kelly's favourite ; there Haphazard, in another corner Waxy ; while over the mantel-piece, in lieu of the mirror of society, a capital portrait of Ord's famous mare Beeswing was suspended. Books littered the table ; accounts of hay and corn mysteriously worked out, though always correct to a bushel or a truss ; ' Racing Calendars,' spurs, whips, and half-a-dozen cigars.

' Ar'm sorry as thoo were't na with us at Burton, sir,' said the trainer as soon as Welford had taken his seat. ' Kingfisher won like a racehorse, though he is't na, leastwise a real game 'un,' he added apologetically. ' I hope's thoo were't well on him.'

' Fairly, Tatham, thanks—fairly. But why isn't Kingfisher a racehorse ? He ought to be, with his blood. By Tramp out of Miriam surely reads like stoutness ?'

' Aye, aye—yes ; jes so, sir ; I know it du, an' if that hoss gets a nice easy weight on his back, and gets well off, he'll try—ah ! and try damned hard, too—beggin' your pardon ; but he won't 'ithout, or I'm no judge. Ah !' cried he, half mournfully, half exultingly, ' Kingfisher ist na like t'ould horse !' and the little man shook his head solemnly.

' There is a hoss now,' he continued reflectively, and in an admiring tone, ' as will try his best when's beaten, and seem not to know or care the vally o' a brass boottun about it.'

' Well, what do you think of his chance for the handicap next week—is he well ?' asked Welford, with a smile.

' Ooh aye, he's well enow ; an' he'll be vary nigh winning, that's my opinion.'

‘What about this gallop with Kingfisher? he ought to tell us whether the old horse is in form, at any rate.’

‘Ay, but thoo mun give Kingfisher two stone at least, he’ll du at that weight, and if Geevanna can best him with it, why—then, says I, why, bless my respected grandmother, the Great Blankshire’s over. For si thee, muster, I don’t say as he can’t gallop—Kingfisher I mean—cause I know as t’ beggar can. Ah! and we’ll put the Grasshopper colt in too; he ist na a vary bad ’un, that ain’t.’

‘Very well, I’ll leave it to you. It’s now nearly nine, and Dr. Monckton is coming over. After breakfast I’ll drive over to the Long Gallop in the park, and we’ll try them at eleven.’

Vary good, sir; but beggin’ your pardon, did I unnerstan’ thee as Dr. Monckton were goin’ to see my hosses gallop?’

‘Why yes, I asked him to come over; he’s going to have an hour or two on the stream afterwards. But why do you ask?’

‘Well, sir,’ said Tatham, screwing his visage into five hundred wrinkles, and looking his master full in the face. ‘Dr. Monckton’s a vary good hand with his rod, and likewise a hextrahornary good doctor when it comes to bolusses and pills, and sich like; but I’d rather my old ’ooman yonder knew all about the spin, for he’s got a tongue as long as a leading-rein, an’ I doubt me you’ll get a vary sorry price agin Geevanna, even if it does come off right.’

‘Oh! but if I pledge the doctor to secrecy, I don’t think he’ll chatter about the matter then,’ rejoined Welford,

as he took up his hat to leave. 'However, we must risk that, now that I have invited him.'

'Well, sir, thoo'lt know best, I dessay ; but, mind yon, I wash my hands of it. Mornin', sir,' added the trainer, as he went out to the door after the retreating form of the master, who, whistling his dogs to heel, prepared for his walk home again.

At the hall-door stood the doctor's gig, its late occupant being already with his patient. He soon reappeared, however, rubbing his hands, and brimful of life and animal spirits.

'Ah, doctor—good-morning ! You're just in time for a late breakfast. Come, sit down—and my darling wife—is she progressing ?'

'Progressing !' with a rich, oily chuckle. 'My dear sir, it's not the word. She's simply making her own running, and winning hands down. She'll be with us again in a week.'

'Capital, doctor ! that's glorious fun. Now—tea or chocolate ? There's cold beef ; tongue there. Ham ? Help yourself. Dry toast ? Certainly. And now, two words, old fellow. You're as good as gold, I know, and the very prince of medicos ; but you're a regular old chatter-box, for all that, you know, old fellow, so no wonder you get on with the ladies so well !'

And the speaker laughed out a hearty laugh that made the room ring again, while the doctor's face became clouded, and then, like an April sky, shone out clear again under the influence of his old friend's heartiness.

'Now then, old fellow,' continued Welford, 'you mustn't be angry with me ; but, as I told you yesterday, we're going



to try the old horse this morning. Kingfisher, Tathan tells me, won the Cup at Burton very easily, and we ought to know, through him, whether the old horse retains his back-end form or not. I am about to take you fully into our confidence, and at the proper time you may use your knowledge as you like. We give the young horse two stone over a mile and a half, and if Giovanni can beat him in anything like good style, you and I shall be all the better for it. But I must ask you, dear old boy, for peace and Tatham's sake, to promise me you will keep this matter to yourself.'

'Why, of course, my dear Welford—of course I shall, chimed in the little man, almost before his friend had done speaking—'of course I shall, and I think you might have known it.'

'I knew you would, old boy; but, as you know, Tatham is very suspicious of everybody. Pooh! how hot it is! Now then—by Jove—half-past ten! We have no time to spare, and Tatham will look as black as thunder if we keep his "hosses" waiting. I'll run up and see Mary for a moment, and meantime you know where the rods are. Get them out, there's a good fellow! Put some cigars in your pocket. The fly-book is on the top of the gun-case. Take two rods with you. I shall very likely join you presently. Ah! here's the phaeton — I won't be a moment.' And the blithe-hearted man went up the wide staircase to his wife's room, three steps at a time, leaving Monckton to his reflections, chief of which were a series of calculations, ending in an inward assurance that it was to Tatham to whom he was indebted for the warning given to him by his host. That settled, he found himself summing up all

with a mental resolve that when next Master Tatham was in a pickle with symptoms of gout, he'd very likely catch pepper and mustard when he (Monckton) was called in to see him and prescribe medicaments for the trainer's ailment.

Ten minutes afterwards Welford was standing with radiant face, and eyes dancing with joyous light, at the doctor's side again, who stood eyeing with critical yet admiring looks, the two perfectly matched chestnuts—as nearly as possible thorough-bred—which, with the groom at their heads, in neat, tight-fitting blue livery, stood champing their bits, and restlessly tossing their heads, impatient even of the restraint of their attendant's hand. Drawing on his driving-gloves, their owner mounted to his seat, and, taking up the reins with light yet firm hand, waited until the doctor had settled himself comfortably.

'Let go, Bob!' he cried; and at the same instant the groom loosing their heads, the hot-blooded horses started, with sidelong, dancing step, and, but for the restraining, firm hand upon their well-taught mouths, would have rolled off with the light phaeton at racing-pace.

'Beautifully matched, Welford, but I shouldn't care to hold such hot pullers for long,' commented the doctor, as they bowled rapidly along the carriage-drive from the hall gates leading to the lodge, and so on into the high-road.

'Oh, they'll soon steady down,' he laughed. 'Quiet, mare!' this injunction being addressed to the near-side animal, who tried a bit of a bolt as a rabbit dashed across the drive and into the shrubberies.

Soon afterwards the lodge was reached, and old Wilson, the lodge-keeper, a bent and withered old man, who had

been boy, farm-hand, gamekeeper, and had at last descended to his present position in the family service, came out, and, swinging the gate wide open, stood with bare head while his master drove through and into the long straggling village street. Here many a curtsy was dropped, and many a hat raised in quiet respect as the phaeton rattled over the stony street and out past Alcaston Church, time-worn and crumbling as to its masonry, and half-smothered in ivy, and so on to the Burton road. Ten minutes more and another little lodge hove in sight, and pulling up here they got down, the groom nimbly getting hold of the horses' heads at the same instant.

'Now, doctor, we'll leave the traps here in Mrs. Miller's charge, and walk across to the Long Gallop yonder. Robert, you can take the horses home; drive slowly, mind. I'll hold their heads while you get up.'

So saying Welford, after giving his cattle half an instant's admiration, turned away as the groom set their heads for home, and leaving the rods and a luncheon-basket amply filled at the lodge cottage, the two men strode across the velvet turf of the park.

Across the velvet turf—green as an emerald, soft yet springy to the foot—with glorious mosses creeping interwoven between the soft sweet grass and splendid pasture. The Southdowns yonder looked like snow hillocks as they lay scattered about on the far side of the grandly undulating park, and so, chatting cheerily as they plodded along, the doctor's little stumps of legs, something like the carved trusses of a Broadwood, had to be moved sharply to keep up with the long strides of his companion. Crushing through

the long fronds of the ferns, that almost breast-high formed splendid cover for both fur and feather, now startling a big hare, which with erect ears goes tit-tupping across the ride, and the next instant was hidden from sight. Dozens of rabbits jumped up now and again from the tangled masses of fern and blackberry, and with a whisk of their white scuts went tearing with express-engine speed across the open, and presently a gorgeous old cock pheasant, with neck scintillating like a jewelled rainbow in the sunlight, rose with a loud whirr of the wings, and shot off through the trees like a rocket. The doctor covered him instantly with his walking-stick up to his shoulder, and the other, humouring the conceit, cried out: 'Well killed, sir!—very well killed indeed!'

Plunging still deeper into the recesses of the wood, the trees—great elms and beeches, with their massive boles covered with climbing ivy tendrils—arched almost overhead, shutting out the intense heat of the sun, and giving the glare a subdued, soft light, mysteriously dim and beautiful. Here and there between breaks in the foliage, the sunlight streamed down in a ray of staring white light, which seemed more brilliant from contrast with the surrounding shadows.

'See, doctor, there are the horses!' exclaimed Welford, as they emerged from the thick cover, pointing down to the valley below. 'Ah! and here comes grumpy old Tatham to meet us. Now, don't forget what I told you, dear old fellow.'

'No necessity to remind me again,' growled the doctor. 'I'm not likely to forget it, nor Tatham either,' he mumbled.



## CHAPTER IV.

### A ROUGH GALLOP.

THE trainer, mounted on a stout grey cob, was bustling him along, and soon joined the two men at the foot of the slope, at the base of which the Long Gallop stretched right round the park, forming an excellent and secluded training-ground for Welford's racehorses.

Touching his hat to his master, and with his customary curt 'Mornin', sir!' to the doctor, he flung his leg over the cob's back, and hooking the rein in the crook of his arm, prepared to walk back to the horses, the little string being ridden by the lads gently in Indian file under the shade of the trees.

'Patsy Doyle rides Geevanna—my boy 'ull be up on Kingfisher, and little Tim can get most out on the Grass-hopper. Now, blarm me! but ne'er a soul on 'em knows a dump how they're weighted, and *I du hope, doctor*, whichever of my hosses wins, we shall have no screemin'. Boys is but boys at best o' times,' he added, apologetically, 'an' jest in the same manner of talking, as the sayin' is, we can't keep 'em too much out o' the know—that's my opinion;' and this peroration was wound up in a tone that evidently to the speaker admitted of no further argument.

‘Now, boys, off wi’ them cloths!’ he cried in sharp, quick tones; adding, with an air of quiet authority which evidently meant business, ‘Mind, thoo’lt all on you ha’ gotten your orders, and I shall have my eye on you—all on you, d’ye mind? And, recollect, thoo’lt nane of you touch a horse with the spur till you see ma handkerchief fall. Then, *all on you try*.

‘They’ll start here, gentlemen, and finish yonder at the clump o’ trees there. It’s a’most over the mile and a half, but that’ll not make much differ,’ he added in an undertone to Welford, and then went to superintend the final touches to ‘his hosses’ toiles—tightening the saddle-girths, looking to the bit and buckles, picking up fore-feet and feeling the shoe fastenings, and giving an eye to the lads all round. ‘Why hanna thoo got thy spurs on, Tim?’

‘Cos I can’t find ne’er a pair to fit me, sir. But this heer Grasshopper don’t want ne’er a bit of spur; he’ll gallop when I want him to.’

Tatham turned away without any comment, and busied himself with something else, not caring to notice the boy’s remark.

Giovanni, the five-year old, was a magnificent dark brown horse, with a white blaze down his face, standing full sixteen hands, by Lord of the Soil (a son of old Filho da Puta’s), his dam Demoiselle, by Cracksman out of Moll in the Wad, by Hambletonian—rare stout running blood this; blood that Tatham could work back for generations. The winner of innumerable cups and plates, no racehorse of the day was better known for his numerous triumphs; while as he stood there under the trees, quiet as an old sheep, he looked,

every inch of him, quality from head to heel, and the very picture of the English thorough-bred. A long, lean, sensible head was well set on to a good neck, great deep shoulders, straight flat legs and good feet, a rare barrel well ribbed up, and with bosses of muscle standing out on his powerful thighs and quarters, that gave promise of immense leverage power to send him home up a hill. Game as a pebble, he was a horse whose rider never knew when he was done with. Moreover, he was the hero of many a race that had been won on the post, whilst running under crushing weights, by the possession of indomitable gameness alone. Since the last back-end he had not put in an appearance on a race-course, being always awarded what appeared a crushing weight, and although he had been in long, strong work all the spring, the majority of race-goers thought that he might never again show under silk. The handicapper, probably entertaining this opinion, had taken somewhat of a liberty with him, and Giovanni had been 'let down' in the Great Blankshire Handicap to a more lenient impost than any accorded him during the previous part of the season.

Kingfisher, the recent winner of the Burton Cup, was a big, good-looking horse, in the very pink of condition. As he stood with the bright light shimmering and glinting on his chestnut coat, he looked a racehorse all over, and with his three white stockings, a very taking horse to the eye.

Tatham, however, who knew him best, said he'd got a soft spot somewhere or other—a weak bit that when the pinch came, and he was fairly collared, would make him put his ears down, drop his hold of the bit, and turn it up. He had certainly done so more than once, when he had

apparently had a race in hand, and then it was all over in an instant.

Somehow the old man never took to Kingfisher—perhaps he had a reason for his antipathy—he nearly always had when he took a dislike to either a man or an animal.

The third in the string of horses circling slowly round and round, was a colt they knew little or nothing about; one that Welford had bred himself, and another of Lord of the Soil's get, out of a famous mare called Grasshopper, which in her day had done good service for her owner. Tatham said 'he were a rare good 'un—he were sartin on it.' Good-looking enough, certainly, was the Grasshopper colt for anything, and with a wear-and-tear varmint expression about him that seemed somehow to say, 'One of these days I'll show you what I can do!' This horse was a bright bay, with black points, good clean legs, and capitally put together, yet looking as though he wanted a lot of time to furnish and fill out.

'Now, genelmen, my hosses are ready; perhaps thoo't all on ye go across to the trees there!' said Tatham, in low tones, without a shade of excitement pervading his words.

'You! young Bob'—this to his son on the chestnut—'thoo knaws as thoo'lt come right along from the post yonder,' indicating a post with his finger on the top of the rising ground. 'And Tim, lad, get down to the five-furlong post and nick in theer; and now, ma boy, just let us see to-day what thoo can do with that brute—he ain't worth his corn, I know!' and here the trainer winked at Welford in a perfectly diabolical manner, as though he had perpetrated a joke of immense proportions.



He watched Tim on the colt—an animal with beautifully low, level action—stride quietly down to the post, and then turning to Doyle, he said, with perhaps a shade of anxiety in his voice :

‘Patsy, boy ’—and the old man laid his hand caressingly on the glossy neck of his favourite—‘ha coorse thoo knaws as thee mun keep as near Kingfisher right through as thee can ; an’ when thoo’rt well round the bend watch for my handkerchief, Patsy, lad ; an’ when it drops, Patsy, I want thoo to win if th’ can—d’ye mind ?’

A look of intelligence passed between the trainer and Patsy, his head lad, the rider of ‘Geevanna,’ and Tatham then turned to see if Welford and the doctor had gained the clump of trees. Finding they were close upon them, he remounted his grey cob, and the lads ranged their horses into a line, from which every now and then the hot-blooded Kingfisher tried to break away, spite of the cool, firm hand of the younger Tatham, who sat the restless brute calm as a Centaur.

At last, ‘Go!’ shouted the trainer, and they were off, Kingfisher stealing a length at the start. When they were fairly away, Tatham turned his cob, and sent him full gallop through the ferns and up the little rise to the clump of trees.

‘Capital start, genelman, though Kingfisher sneaked a bit of the best at going. See, there they are!’ added he, as the two horses rose from the valley and went up the gentle slope ; ‘Kingfisher first, Geevanna second, close to him. Good lad, Patsy ! Clever boy, that, genelman,’ he added, turning round to the men standing by his side, the little

doctor with his face flaming with excitement. 'Ah!' said Tatham, with pursed-up lips, and winding up his remarks, 'and the Grasshopper colt, theer, wunna be in it!'

They suddenly dipped again out of sight.

'Now,' cried Tatham, 'watch for 'em round the bend.'

The seconds seemed to lag tardily—to lengthen into minutes even—before the horses were again seen coming round the bend for home, a straight run in of half a mile, and over a glorious stretch of turf with hardly an inequality in it.

'By gad!' said Tatham, 'that theer Kingfisher's going it this time, after all. Look at that little beggar, Bob; how he's riding! He's a reg'lar little demon. That boy'll win a big race some day.'

Giovanni was in the centre of the course, a length or two behind the chestnut, who still held the lead, while the colt with little Tim up had just nicked in, and was running on the far side by himself.

Suddenly, Tatham pulled out an enormous white handkerchief, half as big as a sheet, seemingly, and exclaiming, 'Now, sir!' to Welford, who was standing calmly watching the horses as they came at a tremendous pace towards them, in wonderful contrast to the doctor, who could hardly contain himself. 'Now, sir, thoo'lt do nowt else, ef tha' pleases, but watch Geevanna!' and at that instant dropped the handkerchief.

The handkerchief fell with a little gentle flutter on the turf, while the lad instantly began to handle his horse resolutely and vigorously when he saw Tatham's signal, the gallant brown horse shooting out at each lift from the boy's

bent shoulders, and creeping up to Kingfisher's quarters, whose rider was already doing all he could with whip and spur to keep his place.

The thunder of their hoofs was heard reverberating on the turf. Giovanni slowly but surely forged along, creeping up stride by stride to Kingfisher's head, who was now surely running gamely enough. Doyle was riding his horse with rare judgment, and wearing the other down by sheer game-ness, when suddenly Welford gripped the trainer's arm, and pointed out the colt, the utterly despised Grasshopper colt, who, seemingly going well within himself, was getting up on the far side. Doyle saw him too, and finding that Kingfisher was nearly settled, watched Tim out of the corner of his eye. Kingfisher's bolt was shot two hundred yards from home, and now this new antagonist challenged attention, for Tim was riding with a stern, set face, and creeping up to the big brown horse inch by inch.

'Bravo, Tim!' yelled the doctor, with a face flaming like the sun. 'Bravo! Grasshopper wins! Damn me if he don't!'

On they flew with thundering hoofs, raising a cloud of dust from the dry turf. Tim, riding with rare nerve and determination for so young a lad, crept up—still crept up—inch by inch, as it were, while Tatham's face was pale, and working with suppressed anxiety. It was a critical moment, but one! two! resounded from Patsy's whip, and the brown horse answering every call Doyle made upon him, dashed by them a gallant winner by two good lengths; the colt second, and Kingfisher a bad third.

'Hooray! hip, hip, hooray!' vociferated the little doctor,

purple in the face. 'We're in it, you infernal old cuss !' he exultingly shouted to Tatham, at the same time attempting to give him a triumphant dig in the ribs.

Tatham's face became black as night, and, turning away, he sneeringly suggested that 'It 'ud be a deal more satisfactory if some people stuck to physic and fishin'.'

This recalled Monckton to a sense of the proprieties, which he could see at once had been offended, at any rate in the trainer's point of view, to a most tremendous extent ; so that he sobered down, at once preparing to follow Welford and Tatham to where the horses were now standing, blowing after their exertions, the lads loosening the saddle-girths a hole or so before putting their clothing on, preparatory to going home.

'I was werry near winnin' without ne'er a spur, sir,' grinned little Tim to Welford, as they came up.

'Yes ; you rode very well, Tim ; very well indeed. There's half-a-sovereign for you.'

'Beg pardon, sir,' said Tatham, interposing with his hand—'beg pardon, sir ; but I never allows ma boys to have money gi'n 'em. It just spoils 'em, and makes 'em cheeky. We'll put it down to his Christmas-boxes—leastwise, if he deserves one.'

A terribly obstinate man, it was useless to argue with Tatham. He called them 'his hosses' and 'his boys,' and almost believed they were ; so that Welford, knowing how to appreciate a good servant, said no more on the subject, save adding assentingly :

'Well, then, put them down a sovereign a-piece for me towards their Christmas-boxes ;' and, as the horses were

moving off towards home, he added : ' Come up to the house this evening after dinner, I wish to see you.'

' Vary well, sir,' rejoined the trainer, and moved off at a swinging canter after the horses.

' Now, Monckton,' said Welford, ' I don't know how you feel, but I'm abominably peckish, and feel very much like inspecting that luncheon-basket. That first, and then we'll try the trout.'

The doctor's eyes glistened like a snake's, and they walked across towards the lodge.





## CHAPTER V.

### AN AFTERNOON ON A TROUT STREAM.

ABOUT midday, after a sultry, close morning, the sky clouded over, and some portentous heat-drops fell from the indigo banks of haze that were sailing slowly overhead. Fell pattering on the leafy canopy under which Welford and the doctor were wending their way to Mrs. Miller's lodge, where the contents of the luncheon-basket and some cool claret promised to be gratefully refreshing after the heat and excitement of the morning.

'It strikes me we're in for a storm, doctor,' said Welford, as they strolled lazily along ; 'and then, I suppose, it's all up with the trout, eh ?'

'Oh, I don't know that ; I've known certain kinds of fish rise wonderfully well after a good shower ; it wakes 'em up. I don't like thunder with it, however.'

'No, I suppose not ; and yet I've heard that fish bite well after a thunder-clap or two, with a regular soaker as an accompaniment.'

'Possibly ; eels will, I know ; aye, and roach and bream, with perhaps some other of the coarser fish ; but not trout, my friend, not trout. No rosebud of a schoolgirl in her first

season—sweet seventeen, you know, and all that rubbish—is more coy and fickle than your aristocratic trout. Difficult to woo, and more so to win. By-the-bye, Welford,’ added the doctor, turning suddenly and sharply on his friend, and looking him full in the face, ‘what’s all this chatter I hear about Eveleen Lancaster and you? Folks say she is breaking her heart about you.’

George Welford’s face blazed crimson; the tell-tale blood rushing like a wave of the sea over his shapely neck and broad open face. Was it anger, or was he conscience-stricken? We shall see.

‘What do you mean, Monckton?’ he vociferated hotly. ‘Who has dared to chatter, as you say, about me? Upon my honour, I think there is more scandal floated at Alcaston, and amongst the tea-drinking old women located in it, than in any village in all broad England,’ and the speaker’s voice sounded high and angrily.

‘My dear fellow,’ said the little man, waving his hands in comical manner, ‘pray don’t pour out the vessels of your wrath on my head. I am simply recapitulating what I cannot avoid hearing; and,’ added the doctor, with a thoughtful expression on his face, ‘I rather thought you would prefer hearing the matter bruited by myself than have it guffawed—yourself in the dark meanwhile—by some ass or other up in the town or on the racecourse. But no doubt I’m wrong; I generally am.’

‘Pardon me, old friend. I was a fool to show my annoyance—at any rate to you; but it is not the first time I’ve heard of this. Young Biggs, from the Brackens, came over the other day to pay his father’s rent; and presently, if you

please, over a glass of sherry, leered and simpered, and generally made an idiot of himself, and told me "As how his sister, you know, had heard, you know, from Mrs. Blogg, and Mrs. Blogg from somebody else, that Miss Lancaster, at the Parsonage, was dying of love for me," with a half-hinted suggestion that I must think myself a very happy man. By Jove! it's enough to make a man go raving mad. And just fancy what the effect of this tale would be if it got to Mary's ears!

'How do you know it has not?' queried the doctor, planting himself full in front of his friend, and leaning back upon his stick.

'Monckton, you don't mean this! Do you really mean to assert that you think it has?'

'Well, between you and me, I don't think anything about it, because I know it has.'

'Good heavens! Do you call yourself my friend, sir, and yet never told me of this before?' cried Welford, in a harsh, stern voice. 'Pray, sir, how long have you known of this little affair? At any rate, how long has my wife confided to you that which she never hinted even to me, her husband?'

'Well, as nearly as I can recollect, perhaps a week,' coolly and quietly responded Monckton. 'I fancy she must have gathered the pith of it from Mrs. Biggs, who I know had been to see her the same morning. Mary told me in the afternoon, when I called upon her; first, however, pledging me, on my word of honour—and that, Welford, I never break—to breathe not a syllable to one living soul. Of course that included yourself, and, until to-day, I could not get her to release me.'



‘And what made her do so to-day?’

‘Just this : I told her the thing, ridiculous as it appeared, was unquestionably talked about, and must come to your ears sooner or later. I therefore begged her to absolve me from my promise, and let me mention it to you.’

‘Doctor,’ said Welford, extending his hand and gripping little Monckton’s outstretched fingers in thorough heartiness — ‘Doctor, I must go to her at once, I cannot let her lie there with this eating at her heart the while ; therefore you stay, dear old friend, and enjoy your fishing, and join me at dinner at seven.’

‘Indeed, well now, you don’t go if I know it,’ replied Monckton, planting his stick resolutely in the moss. ‘Come, sir, come, it’s my turn to be angry now. Mary Welford’s life is in the care of the Most High, and myself as His most humble instrument, so that I am not going to stand by, and perhaps see all that has been done, so far successfully, upset by an act of simple folly. Come, now, Welford, you know all that I know ; it was right that you should, but let well alone. Any excitement in her present state would simply kill her, or next-door neighbour to it ; and besides, I’m very hungry.—What infernal asses most men are, to be sure !’ added the doctor *sotto voce*.

‘Do you think it would harm her, then, to let her know that I have been told all this?’

‘Harm her ! Of course it would,’ blurted out Monckton. ‘Not, perhaps, the mere fact of your telling her, but the little bits of tragedy business afterwards. I know all about it ; you can’t humbug me, bless you ! It would be, “Mary, darling, my soul’s queen, you don’t believe this shocking

tale?" That's you, my friend, in a gloriously lackadaisical tone; then she, sobbing her heart out, would whimper—"No, never, my heart's idol," etc., etc. What follows?—mutual vows of love and undying constancy. Bah! A long-drawn out adieu—bah, sir! all a parcel of rubbish—and down comes the curtain—on what? General unhinge of the system—loss of what little strength she has—lowness of spirits—although I dare say she'd pretend she was most infernally happy—fever at night, etc.—a very pretty *finale*. No, my friend, I feel assured that in this instance you'll say I'm right, and will let well alone; and, again, I dare say you've forgotten it, but I'm most unpoetically hungry.'

'Come along, then, old fellow; I'm very thoughtless, I'm afraid.'

In another five minutes they were at the door of Mrs. Miller's cottage.

'Now, Mrs. Miller,' cried Welford, 'here's Dr. Monckton, as hungry as a hunter; so oblige me by letting us have our basket out. I'd rather have my lunch under these trees than inside, it's so warm,' he added, addressing his companion.

'By all means, just what I was about to propose.'

The comely, dumpling-like Mrs. Miller soon came bustling out, followed by her eldest hope, a yellow-haired lad of fifteen, bearing a mite of a table, upon which the good dame spread a coarse but snowy-white cloth, and then the doctor unpacked the basket. Plates and knives and forks came first, then pigeon-pie, a dainty little loaf, butter, Camembert cheese, and a couple of bottles; so that soon, under the influence of the viands and the excellent claret, all lingering traces of annoyance vanished, and, as the glasses chinked

and the ruby wine winked with a hundred eyes in the sunlight, now peeping out again, the doctor's fat face beamed as happy as ever.

Billy, the yellow-haired lad, had brought out the rods and tackle, and, standing at a respectful distance, was occupied with casting alternate wistful glances at the feasters and screwing on the folding landing-net handle, the while he listened to the conversation of the two men, and watched their every movement out of the corner of his eye while they were finishing their luncheon.

'Billy, lad, have you had your dinner?' called Welford, in kindly fashion, from the little table.

'Ees, muster,' came the reply in a sheepish tone, while the red blush of innocent confusion spread over his tanned cheek.

'Come here, my lad,' he continued, and the boy came shambling along, half ashamed and half frightened as he stood in the presence of 'the quality.' 'Now then,' queried the master, 'what did you have for your dinner?'

'Baacon!' was the reply.

'Do you think you could finish that pie now?'

'Aye, ar could thot!' said Billy, while his eyes gleamed like a hawk's at the mere mention of such a luxury.

'Well, fall to, then, and afterwards ask your mother to let you join me at the stream. Will you come?'

'Aye, Muster Welford, ar knaws she'll let mey coom wi' thee, an' I du knaw where there's a grand 'un.' And the boy's face lit up as though it had been the surface of a dark pool suddenly illuminated by a ray of sunshine.

'What! a big trout? For heaven's sake make haste,

then,' chimed in the doctor. 'And you, Welford, come along—do, my friend; my fingers are fairly itching. Billy, you bring the basket there with you; you'll find us at the top pool.'

The two men, shouldering panniers and rods, then strode off through the glade, under the sheltering foliage of the grand old trees, and presently, emerging into the open park, caught sight of the stream glittering in the sun, its banks shaded by graceful sprays of the silver birch, pollards, and willows lining it, some of the branches drooping almost to the water's edge. Soon they stood upon the banks of the stream, when the doctor, with his voice ringing with the excitement of a true fisherman, said, although in an undertone :

'By Jove, Welford, the May-fly is on! Look! look! and the beggars are rising like mad!'

The short-lived insects were, indeed, on the river in hundreds, now rising with fluttering wing and then dropping next instant on the surface of the water, to be gobbled up by a hungry trout the moment their gauzy wings touched it. Rising fish dimpled the smooth surface on every hand, while now and again a louder splash denoted the presence of a heavier fish than common.

Monckton, with the dexterity of a master-hand, soon had his tackle rigged up, and after thoroughly wetting his gut cast, took out a beautiful imitation of the natural fly from his book, and casting out with a long line, threw right under the boughs of the willows on the opposite side. The fly lighted gentle as a snowflake on the rippling surface of the stream, and sailed down for a yard or so, curling in with the

eddy under the trees. Then, as a swifter ripple caught it in its course, shooting out again to clearer water. Swish ! swish ! swoosh ! comes the line, curling back again in graceful loops over the operator's shoulders, although no hitch or ominous crack of the feather and quill comprising the dainty insect betokened a hurried handling of the rod.

Out flew the line again, straight from the rod's point ; and, just close to the black stump jutting out from the sheltering alders, the lure settled with upright wings upon the curling stream. A rise ! a subtle rise, only betokened by a swirl of the deep water, with a hardly perceptible twitch at the fly. An upward yet gentle sweep of the doctor's arm was followed by a splash, a tremendous commotion among the dangerous drooping branches, and a fierce scream and rattle from the reel, all jumbled together, the eye and ear catching each sensation at one and the same instant. Not all Tatham's set stern face, or the anxious determination pictured in every line of it, as there seemed a chance of his old favourite being beaten, could rival Monckton's expression of feature at the moment when his gloriously spotted prey, with resolute, undaunted courage in every effort, tried again and again, at the extreme risk of smashing his delicate tackle, to gain the shelter of the tree roots, a movement only prevented by the doctor's light hand putting the finishing strain on—the last unbearable bit of sting from the hook—at the very instant when another foot would have been certain destruction.

Never a word spoke Welford, but stood by watching the craftsman's wondrous tact and skill with admiring eye, for

albeit he himself was but a poor fisherman, he could yet recognise consummate skill and subtlety in others. It became too hot a corner at last, and then with a bound, rivalling that of the king of the jungle when he springs out from leafy shelter to strike with his murderous paw some unhappy native postman or water-carrier, the harried trout gave it up at last, and flashing upwards, like a great bar of silver splashed with ruddy gold, he turned tail and flew down stream. Instantly there went up to the sky a wild hurrah ! a frantic Irish yell, as, with the wheel screaming musically, Monckton blundered on among the sedgy pools by the side of the stream in pursuit of the gallant fish. Ah ! how he tried for the side, and yet once more for the shelter of those good tree roots, where he, perhaps, hoped to drive his crafty nose among their entangling stems, and with one subtle powerful twitch, at any risk, drag the torturing steel out once for all ! But the man at that rod's butt was a wonderful good judge of troutcraft, and, humouring his first plunge on account of its strength, the next instant he threw the top-joint yet farther back, and, pointing his ash-butt full at his partly hidden foeman, in two seconds brought him flouncing to the top, evidently very near that critical period which a whaleman would have called his 'flurry.' Welford had put down his own rod, and now stood close to the doctor, cigar in mouth, watching the contest with a keen sense of enjoyment, while the shock-haired lad—seeing from the bent and springing rod that a fish was on, came running across the meadow with huge bounds, and roaring to the little medico at every yard he ran, to 'keep the rod up, or he'd be in t' trees'—came madly plunging through the

ferns, landing-net held aloft, with the speed of a hind who hears the first crash of the hounds behind her.

‘Dash you, Billy, hold your tongue!’ screamed the doctor, as the fish made a fresh plunge for the waving patches of weed floating like a drowned woman’s hair close by him.

‘Hold your tongue, boy, do! Gently, my beauty!’ he continued, apostrophizing his trout—‘gently! Come now, we’ve had enough of this.’

Then putting on a still deadlier strain, the fish, fairly done up, at last turned on his side, and came floating gently over the wave, yet, even in his dying hour, game as a cock to the very last, tried a feeble rally of his spent strength, beating with tremulous fins the surface of his loved streamlet.

‘Now, Welford, will you oblige me with the net? Ah! would you?’ he added, as the fish, catching sight of the extended weapon, shook his shapely head, and essayed a final dash. ‘That’s it! well done!’ he continued, as Welford, holding his net steady and deep down in the water, waited patiently until the fish was well over the ring.

Then he lifted him into the capacious bag, and next instant carried him up the bank, turning him out among the green fronds of the fern, where he lay like a piscine model covered with costly jewels, so gloriously did the sun’s rays play and ripple upon his painted sides.

‘There, old fellow!’ cried Monckton jubilantly, dashing his clenched fist into Welford’s ribs. ‘What do you think of that? Isn’t he a beauty—say now—and worth all the horses in the world?’

‘Don’t know about that, doctor,’ cried the other, laughing; ‘but he’s a handsome prize for all that. By-the-bye,

is hitting out straight from the shoulder one of the usual concomitants of trout-catching ?

‘Be aisy wid ye, ye divvle ! and put that on your cast,’ and the doctor tendered his host a counterpart of his own fly, after giving an admiring glance or two at its feathery beauty, and a cautious puff, with pursed-up lips, to blow the hackles out.

Welford linked the furry morsel upon his gut cast, and then Monckton pointed out, before moving farther down stream, a spot where another good trout was sucking down every floating May-fly that came sailing along under the shelter of the alders, telling ‘the master’ to cast quietly a yard or so above him, and bring his line round in the sweep of the eddy.

‘Ah ! all very well for you, old fellow, who it seems can do just what you like with a fly-rod. For me it’s a different matter. But, however, here goes ; it’s the old tale of Piscator and Auceps over again, eh !’

‘Ay, maybe ; and if you can apply any little hints that Mentor gives Telemachus touching the application of common sense, at the same time, to other matters, do,’ cried Monckton, as he prepared to move off, while Billy followed him, as being, perhaps, the likelier hand, and thus affording more chance of sport.

A gloomy cloud settled upon Welford’s face, although he felt that the doctor’s suggestion was meant in all kindness, while he stood immersed in thought and utterly forgetful of the trout under the alders, until that kingly denizen of the stream growing hungrier or further excited by a more luscious May-fly than usual, flounced out of the water, showing



his gloriously spotted side for a single brief instant of time, Then Welford woke up from his reverie, and throwing in bungling fashion, hitched up his cast in a tuft of high fern at his back, breaking it as a matter of course with the back sweep of his rod.

‘*Peste!* what an ass I am!’ he exclaimed. ‘Thank heaven, neither Billy nor Monckton is in sight; so here goes for repairs.’

He soon had the fly extracted and the cast retied, and then, creeping carefully to the side of the stream, he again threw—this time with better success, for a puff of wind at his back carried the fly right across, and within two feet of the trouty corner.

Flash! Up came a great ripple of light and a bulging wave eddied out, followed of course by that instant jerk of the wrist, long before the fish had really taken the fly, that marks the arrant duffer at trouting.

‘Confound it! missed him!’ he cried. ‘Devil take the thing! how Monckton would have grinned! One of those silent horrible grins of his that puts me in mind of nothing so much as old Leather-stocking.’

Again he threw, and again fortune, aided by the wind, favoured him—as, by-the-bye, she usually does favour novices in fishing matters—the lure settling quietly upon the water, a few inches from the place of his first cast.

Again came the trout at the fly, causing a superb roll of the glittering water in his front, and this time, restraining his impetuosity, Welford waited until he saw the line absolutely growing taut, when he raised the point of the rod. Heaven and earth! A pull, a heavy lunge under the

bushes: Welford replying to it by an equally heavy pull outwards. Any ordinary fisherman would have been smashed up clean as a carrot. Welford, however, escaped, because he was an extraordinary hand at the game, and instead of the trout forcing himself among the submerged roots and boughs, he came deliberately out, and, flying down stream, buried himself deep down and clean in the middle of a weed-patch—so far, safe as a church and firm as a rock.

No amount of hard pulling moved him, and, determined not to be done, Welford quietly slipped down the bank and walked in up to his middle, winding in loose line as he went. Presently, however, the water deepened still more, and Prudence cried, ‘Hold hard, friend!’ Welford listened to Prudence, and in his turn yelled out lustily for Billy:

‘Billy ahoy, ahoy!’

No Billy came, and again Welford raised his voice right sturdily, waking up the echoes hiding among the great trees in the park, and presently the lad’s touzled shock of yellow hair was seen above a distant clump of rushes, from the cover of which, as soon as he saw Welford in the water, with the rod bent double and arching over his head, he came at once full pelt with hasty strides, brandishing the net over his head.

‘Ho’ud on to him, muster; ho’ud on to him!’ screamed the boy, almost out of breath. ‘Is’tna deep-like where he be? but dunnot thee move; there’s a maist big hole in front o’ thee.’

Welford was quite deep enough for comfort, in his own opinion, and didn’t mean to move. Presently the boy got opposite the patch of weed in which the fish had taken refuge, and began to peer about in the recesses of the waving mass.

‘Keep still, will ’ee, now!’ he roared, utterly oblivious of ‘the quality’ in the excitement of the operation of viewing the trout. ‘Keep ’ee still, darn tha’, doo. Ar can see ’un. Oh, holy Moses! but he be a gurt ’un;’ and in he went quietly up to the middle with as little disturbance of the water as though he had been an otter. Then he waded with cautious steps, keeping clear of the taut line, until he got close to the tangled weed, when, again peering down with his face close to the water’s edge, he suddenly slid the net down in front of the fish, and moving one leg suddenly, a pull at his arms and a sustained joggling at the handle told him that the fish had cleared himself and rushed clean into the deep meshes of the net.

Billy had him out in an instant, and, caring little enough for Welford’s tackle now, floundered along until he reached the bank, up which he scrambled with a noble three-pounder and as much weight of weed in the bag of the net.

‘Bravo, Billy, you’re a jewel!’ cried Welford. ‘Cut away home now and change your clothes, and here’s half a crown for you.’

‘Ha’af a croon! What, for gettin’ yon fish out? Oh, thankee, muster, thankee! Ar’ll come fishin’ every day i’ tha’ week for nothin’!’ cried the boy, in astonished wonder at such a piece of good fortune. What to the man was a very fleabite, made Billy a millionaire on the spot, and, taken fairly aback by his good fortune, away he went without another word.

Picking up the net and the fish, Welford started to rejoin the doctor, whom he found playing another grand little trout, which was making vigorous dashes for life and liberty.

It was soon landed, however, and after all due admiration had been expended upon Welford's big fish, in weight just exceeding the doctor's first prize, they packed up their traps and started for the lodge, at which rendezvous Bob and the chestnuts were expected to meet them at six.

'Well, doctor, how have you enjoyed yourself?' asked Welford, as they walked hastily over the park on their way to Mrs. Miller's. 'Fairly, I suppose?'

'Fairly! By Jove!' he replied, with a sigh of magnitude, 'I wish there was nothing but trout-fishing, morning, noon, and night, and there was not such a thing as a pill or a potion in the world. I hate 'em; 'pon my soul I do; to-day worse than ever, for I think of the miseries of the morrow. There, I've got about forty babies, big and little, to humbug. Oh! it's a beastly profession—without a light in its shade—lots of work and little brass. Bah! Give me trout-fishing!'

'But, my dear old boy!' cried Welford, laughing heartily, 'trouting won't bring grist to the mill.'

'No; nor pills either, in Alcaston. People's as hard as flint, sir—flints, rocks, iron. Save Brown's babies—Lord prosper 'em and keep 'em ailing—there isn't a soul sick or sorry in the whole place.'

'You forget my dear girl, doctor, eh?'

'Forget! No; not I! Another bit of flint, if you'll let her alone. Ah! by-the-bye, one word about Eveleen Lancaster, and I'll never enter your doors again. I say so for her sake.'

'All right, Monckton; I'll not forget. Here's the carriage. I don't know that I shall be sorry to get home. I feel, *à la* Mantalini, like a dem'd damp, moist, unpleasant body.'



## CHAPTER VI.

### MASTER AND MAN.

AFTER dinner was over Welford and the doctor adjourned to the snug library—the same room in which the opening features of this tale are laid—and, lighting cigars, they sat chatting upon the events of the morning. Had Welford been a wise man in his generation, he had kept matters connected with his horses more to himself. As it was, if he had a ‘good thing,’ in racing parlance, the probability was that his friends shared to the full as much of the fruits of his knowledge as he did himself. But then, thank goodness, they manage these things better nowadays, and Jack o’Lantern wins to-day with ten stone up, over a mile, beating some of the very best cattle running, while the following week, among an absolutely indifferent field, and with a stone less to carry, he is not in the first three. Irreconcilable, probably ; but then look at the glorious uncertainty of the Turf, and what it would be without it. Besides, it is the public who bleed most freely. And quite right too, say the owners ; they should not plunge, but should rather wait patiently until all the ‘stable money’ has been invested, and then pick up what crumbs they can.

A hard verdict? Stuff and nonsense! Horses are not kept for the public; and if 'Captain Armstrong' gets up now and again, and they don't know it and owners do, so much the better for those whose names head the hay and corn bills, and so much the more certainly will it keep the Turf pure, stainless, and free from taint. 'Certainly,' says Captain A. 'Vive bone and muscle in a man's forearm, and you go and lay another "monkey," Tommy.'

'I suppose, then,' said Monckton, between vigorous puffs at his Cabana, 'that you consider the Great Blankshire as good as over?'

'No, I don't say that. Sir Marmaduke, a rattling good horse, is well in, and, I'm told, is very fit. Then there's Frenzy; and you know what a race she made of it in the Cup last spring with my old horse. A very near thing that!' he added reflectively, as he blew a thin wreath ceilingwards. 'Very clever people behind Frenzy, doctor.'

'So they may be—so they are, we'll say; but if the horse is fit and well, and you mean winning—as I'm sure you will do if you can—what then? Giovanni beat her with a bigger weight to the bad before, why not now? I tell you what, I shall put my pot on while there's a price!'

'And spoil my market, eh? Much obliged, I'm sure,' replied Welford, with a genial, hearty laugh. 'You'll do better in this way, old fellow. Tell me what you want on, and leave the matter in my hands. Comfort will work the commission all right, and the best price I get is yours to your money.'

'Agreed! Couldn't be better. Perhaps, then, you'll book me fifty—hang it! say a hundred; and if it comes off

I'll cut pills for ever ; I'll be scalped if I don't ! Here, give me another weed ; the very mention of "shop" seems to fill the room with odours of scammony and asafœtida.'

'There you are,' said Welford, as he closed his memorandum-book. "'Dr. Monckton—Great Blankshire, £100 on Giovanni." Terribly hot, isn't it? Pass me the claret. Thanks !' and he filled his tumbler.

At that moment a low tap was heard at the door.

'Come in !' cried Welford, directly afterwards asking—as a bright-eyed, sunny-haired girl, wearing a neat lace cap, put her head discreetly in at the door—'What is it, Phyllis?'

'Please, sir, it's Mr. Tatham from the stables, and he says as he's to see you this 'mediately.'

'Tell him to come in, my girl,' he replied, whilst the doctor looked up curiously at the strange character of the message.

'Tatham's got the gout again,' he said presently ; and very confidentially to himself, 'I'm open to bet upon it—and he's come up here for me, confound him ! Lord save the Royal Family !—how I do hope he has !'

At this juncture the trainer shambled into the room. We have said that on foot he was almost a cripple ; but at this moment he looked as though he had not a leg to stand upon, and wore a look of settled gloom upon his face as black as a thundercloud.

'Why, Tatham,' cried Welford, in somewhat alarmed tones, as the thought flashed over his mind that the stables and their occupants had come to direful grief, 'what on earth is the matter?'

‘Good-evenin’, doctor,’ said Tatham, taking little notice of his master’s question—‘Good-evenin’. Fine day for fishin’, I suppose? Cloudy—hatmospere full o’ hinsecs, aye, and grubs, and sooch-like. Reglar warin’ day for fishin’, eh?’

‘Very,’ assented Monckton, looking at his questioner askance, and with a certain twinkle in his eye. ‘Very, indeed;’ and then Welford asked again—and point-blank this time, noticing his trainer’s badly-smothered anxiety—whether anything was the matter with the horses.

‘No, sir, there ain’t,’ replied the old fellow, with a sigh of relief. ‘Not a hattom. Not a mossel. They’re extry superlative just now, as the sayin’ is;’ and he fidgeted about with his hat, twirling it round and round by its stiff brim before adding, ‘Ar was soomwhat in hopes of finding you alone, sir. I hope my good mistress is getting on?’

‘Very well indeed, thanks; but anything you have to say, Tatham, you may say before the doctor, I’m sure.’

‘Ar’d reythar not, sir,’ said the other bluntly. ‘No offence to the doctor meant, and none taken, I hope. None better at boluses and sech like; but he du scream, and that’s a fact; and if there’s one thing as du git ma’ monkey up it’s to hear a man screamin’ for ar’ll the woorld like a gall ha’ been’ kissed before her feyther.’

Had it been upon a question of far graver importance Welford had not been able to control his risible faculties, so dogged and determined was old Tatham’s opposition to the doctor being a sharer of any of his secrets; the consequence was that he laughed out heartily, while Monckton, rising, said quietly:



‘I’ll go, Welford. I won’t interfere with Mr. Tatham’s arrangements for the world. No symptoms of gout yet, eh, my friend? No? Ah, very glad; it’s a lucky thing for you, very; but come to me when you get a preliminary twinge! That’s right. Good-night, Welford!’

‘Now, Monckton, stay, do. Tatham won’t keep me five minutes, I’m sure, and then we’ll have another bottle of claret. Stuff and nonsense about going; sit down and finish your cigar.’

‘Thanks, no. It’s late as it is, and Burrows has got the key of the poison-chest. Heaven only knows what may not have happened between morning and now! Again good-night, my friend. All’s perfectly well upstairs. Good-night, Tatham; send for me at the first symptom, my man. Good-night!’ and the doctor walked rapidly out of the room, with every sign of displeasure on his open face, but closing the door so gently that it barely creaked.

For a single moment there was a dead silence, broken only by the rustling of Tatham’s horny fingers on the brim of his hat. Then Welford spoke, with a shade of vexation pervading his usually hearty tones.

‘Really, Tatham, I do wish you would control your blunt speech a little; you’ve fairly hurt Monckton.’

‘Sorry for it, sir, but ar canna help it; there’s vary little warnish about me, I’m afraid.’

‘Well, well, it can’t be helped now; but in the name of Fate, what is this tremendous communication you have to make?’

The man ceased fumbling with his hat aimlessly, and started upon brushing the nap straight. When that process

was settled to his entire satisfaction, he put it carefully upon the table. Then he quietly and very methodically unbuttoned his coat, and taking out a stuffy, fat-looking pocket-book, slowly opened it, and selecting a greasy, dirty-looking envelope, put it down before his master. It was addressed to 'Mr. Patrick Doyle, care of Mr. Tatham, Alcaston Hall.'

'"Thoo must know as there was a dirty-looking lad a-hangin' about the lodge," said my old 'ooman to me when I got in this evening,' he began; 'and the old 'ooman—a 'cute 'un, too, in the natur' o' lads—couldn't make nothin' on him.

' "What did he want?" ses I.

' "Said as how he wanted Mr. Doyle," ses she.

' "Oh, he wanted Mr. Doyle, did he, my dear! And wheer mout this same lad be at this moment?"

' "Why there he is," ses she, "as ploomp as a flea on a helephant's back, as the sayin' is."

' Well, I looks out of the window, and sure enough there was this 'ere boy, which ar reco'nised him, ar did, as a boy as they has oop at the George in the village yonder. At first ar didn't quite see the lay o' the thing—as the Dutchman said when he'd had a smeller on the nose. Howsomever, ar went to the stables, and pops t' saddle on t' cob's back, slipped the bridle on, popped my leg across him, and out ar went into the road leading on to t' common. As soon as the younker see me, he slips into the ditch, an' ar sent the cob across t' fuzzes best leg foremost. Gettin' to the ditch, ar couldn't see ma lad at first; but old Hero had follered me, and when ar see him, ar shouted to the lad, wherever he was a-hidin', that if he didn't come out,

ar'd set t' dog on him. Then out he crawls from just under my vary nose, where he was hid under t' fern and blackberries.

'Ses ar, "Ma lad, what dost want?"

' "Nothing," ses he.

'Ses I, "Why don't you find it, then, and go home? They want you oop at the George by this time, ar should think. You've been a-hanging on here all the afternoon, after Mr. Doyle, eh?"

'Sulky that boy was. Ah! as sulky as the devil was when he sit hisself down on a hieberg, and got a chill.

' "What do you want along o' Mr. Doyle?" ses I.

' "Why, ar wants to see him," ses he.

' "What for?" ses I.

'Then he gets sulky again, and ar slips off the cob, gets hold on him by the collar, and ses I:

' "My lad, if you don't tell me the truth about all this, I'll give you the darndest hidin' as you ever had in your life."

'Well, ha coorse thoo knows he wrastles a bit, and findin' that no go with old Hero a-growlin' all the while like a whole cage o' lions short o' grub, he suddenly says as he'd got a letter for him.

' "Who from?" ses I.

'He didn't know—ha coorse he didn't; but it was from a gent as was a-stoppin' at t' George, as had give him a shillin' for bringin' it over.

' "You give it to me, then," ses ar.

' "Not mooch," ses he; "why should I?"

'Well, ar tips him a reg'lar sneezer with ma ash-plant across his cushion, and, my eye, he comes the woeful awful

—bellerin' like a owd 'ooman at a Dorcas meeting. Aye, ma dear man, now will you believe it, before ar could gin him another o' the same, he plays his ace—and theer it is. Now you know the fax; and that closes the case for the prosecution, as the bigwigs say.'

'Well, but my dear Tatham, what on earth has this got to do with me? Here's a letter addressed to Doyle from some one who may be writing to him on a matter of business. Now, how can that possibly affect me, or what have I to do with it?'

'Why, oopen it, ar should say, and see what the gentleman wants,' replied the old fellow grimly. 'Boys in racin' stables ain't not to have no letters, nor nothin' else, excepting plenty o' grub, and stick if they're sarcy. Anyhow, that's my opinion.'

'Frankly, then, I don't share it. Please give the letter to Doyle, with the best excuse you can make for its being delayed. Will you have port or sherry?'

'Nothin', thank you, sir. This is a corker, as the gentleman said when he'd swallowed a bung. As you're master, all vary good and proper; but ar think, if ar'd been in thy boots, matters might ha' ended slightly different.'

'Nonsense, Tatham—sheer nonsense; I have no more right to open Doyle's letter than you have to open one of mine!'

'Ar dessay you're reet, sir; I'm not well up in these matters. But may I ask whether you see nothin' in the handwriting to make you alter your opinion?'

Welford took the letter up again, saying, however:

'Even if I did, nothing would alter my opinion upon such

a question,' whilst he looked curiously, by the light of a wax candle, at the greasy, thumbed envelope. Presently he raised his head, and asked, in slightly agitated tones: 'Do you, Tatham, see anything in this?'

Tatham's eyes twinkled, as though his hour of triumph were at hand, as he said:

'Ef ar hadn't, sir, ar doubt me if ar should have made so mooch of it.'

'Well; what do you think about it, then?' said Welford anxiously, yet with a perceptible tinge of gratitude prevading his tones.

'Why, sir, ar think that theer letter was written by Captain Welford, aye that there's soom darned mischief afoot, either to my hosses or some'at else. That's what ar think, glimed ef ar doan't!'

'Have you any other reason to think that letter was written by my brother?'

'Yes, ar have,' said the other stubbornly; 'I met Joe Morton yesterday morn in th' market-place, and he telled me as he was certain he saw th' captain hanging about the Mill, pretendin' to fish and sooch-like, and Joe swore, he did, that if he caught him near his wife he'd shove him in th' mill-dam, even if he hanged for it. Ar did na' tell thee yesterday, for ar thought Joe, jealous-like, mout be mistaken; but when that letter coomed, and ar seed it, ar was near certain as it was the captain's fist—you know he and Patsy was always thick-like—ar ses to mysen', there's mischief afoot, either to my hosses or to Joe's wife—a silly fool!—and here I am.'

'Tatham, I thank you very very much. Still, Patsy must

have his letter, even if it comes from the Devil himself, so give it to him at your breakfast-time to-morrow, and keep him with you in your own room until I can get over. I shall not be behindhand. Now, good-night ! it is getting late.'

'Good-night, sir.'

And the man went out, leaving his master with a heavily-clouded brow, and a fit subject for a train of deep and gloomy thought. The door had barely closed before it was again cautiously opened, the trainer putting his head in, with a finger placed slyly upon his smooth upper lip.

'Thoo knows as it ain't been much of a lively nature as has took place to-night, sir, as the flea said when he got cracked on the gentleman's thumb-nail, but ar had a bit o' news for you as I'd most forgot, and it's of a cheering natur' this time. One thing, however, ar must beg o' thee, and that is as thoo keeps it to thyself—will you promise me now, leastwise for the present ?'

'Yes, Tatham, if it is necessary—what is it ?'

'Well, we've got that theer brown colt in at Epsom—that there Grasshopper-bred one, I mean !'

'Yes, what of it ?'

'Well, sir, not much, ar'll admit ; but, burn my grandmother ef ar don't think we've got the winner—and ar tell you plainly we've got a blamin' good 'un in him as I means taking care of. We must wait, however, till this handicap is over, and then ar'll tell thoo some'at. Meantime, don't forget as ar says as he's a sneezer—that's what he is, a sneezer—good-night, sir !'

And this time Tatham was gone for good.



## CHAPTER VII.

### THE POOL AT LITTLEWASH MILL.

THERE is not a more sleepy, dull old town in all broad England than Alcaston, and standing as it does in a lovely pastoral valley, through the very heart of which the Swash brawls and bubbles, its very quaintness has a beauty entirely its own. The river, too, has its peculiar features, for one moment it is fussily splashing and foaming among rocky boulders and over bright golden-hued gravel shallows, with murmurous merry tinkle, like the laugh of happy children, and upon which the most gloriously beautiful trout in the world lie in any reasonable quantity, hiding behind the slippery stones ; while anon it expands a hundred yards farther into a deep, solemn pool, over which hoary beeches and venerable gnarled and twisted oaks intertwine their long arms lovingly overhead from either side.

In the depths of each recurring glassy, waveless pool there are great shoals of heavy bream, flat-sided and bronze-gold in colour, and these revel amid the cool solitudes, in company with chub—thick-backed, ponderous, pink-lipped fellows, who are wont to lie in wait under the spreading scrub and underwood, sucking down, with an unctuous smack of the lips, every unhappy grub or heavy-winged

cockchafer that hapless tumbles from a drowsy perch among the green leaves, to fall with a splash upon the still surface of the water. There feebly making wide circles with lazy burr of the gauzy wings, the faint struggle ends by one of the monsters suddenly rising and engulfing the drowning insect in the ample capacity of a mouth big enough to drop a small potato in.

Small wonder, then, that whilst idling through the long summer days at Alcaston, one tumbles now and again across a subtle wielder of the angle, simple-hearted as a child, easily content, yet crafty as a fox, and with as velvet-shod a footfall when upon the war-path. Neither need the wonder be much less if, when aimlessly and listlessly pushing one's way through the clustering hazels and alders that grow thickly tangled along the banks of the stream, one comes across an odd-looking object that, at first sight, one can hardly make anything out of—putting one very much in mind of an 'unco canny' ostrich, who, hiding his head in a bush, thinks his whole body secure from the hunter's vision. This invariably turns out to be one of the followers of the immortal Izaak, who, with half his body pushed among the alders overhanging one of the deep chub holes, is luring to his doom one or more of the leather-lipped denizens of the watery fastness.

Perchance he is using an abominably deadly lure in the shape of a baby frog, with a stout perch hook nicked through the skin of the back, and who, kicking up no end of a bother on the still surface of the hole, proves at last irresistible to the craftiest Swash-bred chub that ever wagged a fin.



Ah, and how powerful was wont to be the attractions of a fat, yellow-banded humble bee, fresh caught, and half drunk with the sweets of pink clover, or the nectar distilled from the azure cups of the nodding blue-bells. Alack-a-day ! those days on the Swash seem so 'langsyne' now, that one half-involuntarily raises one's head, and, catching a reflection of it in the dusty glass which ornaments one's mantelshelf, falls to musing upon how very grey and thin one's hair begins to look !

Surely there never was such a lovely haunt for the revels of the fabled fairies as that Swash valley ! Hardly could one pass any of the great spreading beeches—true monarchs of the wood—with each magnificent trunk and lower arms studded with irregular patches of velvety moss, without a tinge of half-delirious fear.

This moss grew in rank profusion among the roots of the short, sweet grass, and a very forest of blue-bells, primroses, and violets in the early spring, covering up the entrance to numerous mysterious caves among the roots of the trees, so that no one could pass without venturing upon an awesome peep among the knobby and twisted roots, to see whether one could descry the interior of one of the palaces inhabited by the little people.

Again, one was apt to imagine that at the very next turn among the giant stems one might haply come upon Puck, Queen Mab, Mustardseed, and a whole crew of merry gnomes, merrily footing it on a carpet of emerald moss to the music of flutes made from the tiniest of the hollow reeds at the water's edge, and drums manufactured from the cups of the autumn acorns. These, of course, would be

lustily beaten and blown by an orchestra, the members of which sat upon the tops of the rings of pink-gilled forest fungi growing round the roots of the great trees, and each with his little cheeks so red with the exertion of keeping time to the active dancers, that they looked strangely brilliant in contrast with the pale azure of their caps of harebells or crimson snapdragon bloom.

All these fancies, and many more equally as feeble, used to crowd in upon one's thoughts in past days while one wandered, rod in hand, through the dim glades of the forest valley. It was not so strange that they should, either because it was a place where not a sound disturbed the solemn silence of the whispering woods, save the far-off yelp of a shepherd's dog, gathering in the white-fleeced flocks that dotted the uplands with snowy hillocks ; the low, mournful coo of the stockdove ; the distant shout of a child to its companions, echoing and gathering sound among the great trees, who had, mayhap, found a more gloriously blue bank of harebells, a blackberry branch fuller than ever of the ripe, luscious fruit, or some nuts actually dropping from their shucks, yet a little too high for the eager hand.

And how many times, as one has reached the bridge, a crumbling, rickety old structure, of white, shaling stone, covered with creeping moss and silvery lichens, boasting of a single high Norman arch, through which the stream swept with wonderful rapidity over the golden trout shallows, has one not been startled out of nearly all the little wits one ever possessed by a huge grey heron suddenly flapping up, with harsh, discordant scream, and

winging his way up stream, to find more peaceful fishing-grounds.

And what trout there were upon those shallows ! Lusty, fat fellows, brown and silver, dappled with crimson, orange, and gold, and game as tigers. Yes, there is no disputing it, they were shy of a fly, unless very nicely manipulated, but then they after a minnow spun sharply through the foamy runs, and among the huge boulders, like a flash of lightning. Many and many a one has been hooked, many a one landed, and still more lost, among those sharp-edged stones—and one has gone on so wrapped up in the glorious sport, that one has noted not that the evening shadows were coming on apace, and had already wrapped upland and plain, dell and dingle, in misty vapour.

Very soon afterwards the glorious summer sky had faded from glowing orange to dull crimson and apple-green, and higher up in the heavens to pearly grey.

Then the bats, with silent, still strokes of their active wings, hawking back and forth in the ambient air, wheeling low began round the trees, and mounting high ever and anon in chase of a stronger-winged insect ; while perhaps it has not been until a great beetle has ‘ boomed ’ once, twice, with his powerful wings close to one’s ear, that one has realized that the star of love, chaste Venus, was high in the heavens, and glittering like a flame-tinted diamond in a setting of greyish-emerald sky ; have seen that the forest shades were getting dimmer, and still deeper in sombre colour, and have at last regretfully, yet happily, set one’s face for home.

Then how full of awesome noises were the forest aisles.

Hares rustled amongst the tall ferns and bracken, while as to rabbits, jumping up here, there, and everywhere, one only caught a momentary glimpse of a white tail, as, frightened out of their lives, they flew at high-pressure speed into a tangled copse, or went spanking down a high bank as though they had the dogs of the Wild Huntsman himself close upon their heels. Then was the time, just as the dusk of evening set in, to hear the partridge calling ‘kur-ruck, kur-ruck’ on all sides among the dim misty lowlands. Many a gorgeous old cock pheasant, with neck scintillating like a casket of dusky jewels in the gloaming light, would jump up at one’s feet with a whirr of his powerful pinions that would make one quiver again, the while the sombre wood was ringing with the amorous, plaintive pleadings of the ‘bird of night.’

The dim light deepened and grew still murkier, and then sweet Philomel, with his soft breast pressed close to the sharp spears of a hoary thorn, filled the mysterious shades with, now a burst of raging fiery passion, anon a gush of sobbing melody. Strange, aye, sad and passing strange, but this glorious song, heard by a love-sick girl, would cause her like enough to throw herself sobbing on to the dewy grass, her own beating heart pressed close to mother earth, muttering—silly fool!—fervent, eager prayers for the safety of her dark-eyed sailor lad, her Jack, far and away, yet homeward bound, topping the bounding billows. And he—well, he was like enough laughing, as he thought of the brown-haired, blue-eyed girl at home, while the salt spray flying in his own honest eyes cuts his face as though with a whip-lash. Homeward bound, though, and presently Jack

will have his arm round Nannie's yielding waist, and she'll find more music in the tones of his hearty voice, as he tells her of the wonders of 'foreign parts,' than in all the nightingales in the world.

The Pool at Littlewash Mill Farm, a holding in the occupation of Joe Morton, was one of the most favourite spots for the anglers of Alcaston—quiet, sober-minded men, who were wont to steal away from toil now and again, invariably making straight for the millpool. This, deep, foaming, and impetuous from the fall of the waters of the Swash, was full of big fish ; and here they could always obtain leave to angle from Joe, a stalwart, fair-haired man, a splendid shot, a magnificent swimmer, and a good fisherman, and one upon whom the county eleven always depended to snatch a match out of the fire at the last moment.

Joe Morton was courting Lizzie Ardron, the eldest daughter of a well-to-do grocer in the town, and perhaps the biggest flirt in all broad England. She was a singularly beautiful girl—tall, supple, and graceful as a cedar, with soft blue eyes, full and languishing in expression, and fair brown hair, that rippled in shimmering waves over a low, broad forehead. She boasted of a perfect oval face, with a round, dimpled chin, an exquisitely shaped mouth, and a row of teeth that she did not forget to show when a merry laugh lit up the expression of her lovely features, each one rivalling Indian pearls in their sheeny whiteness. Scores had loved Lizzie, who had encouraged each in turn until a wealthier suitor appeared upon the scene. Half a dozen had fought for her, and gone home with broken heads and damaged noses, and whom she had laughed and made merry fun of the next day.

At last came a day when Welford's younger brother, a captain in a dashing cavalry regiment, and a thoroughly unprincipled scoundrel, so far as morals went, came home, bronzed, *blasé*, and weary of foreign service, and took up his abode at the Hall. The very week following his arrival a hunt-ball was held in the town, and Lizzie of course, the handsomest woman for miles round, was present, with her head full of vanity, and her fickle heart full of anticipated conquest.

The Master of Alcaston went, equally as a matter of course, George taking his young wife with him, and leaving the captain very much to his own resources. That gallant officer was not in the ballroom long before he espied Lizzie, radiantly beautiful, dressed in exquisite taste, and the centre of an admiring group. Amongst them was Joe Morton, of Littlewash, the last upon the list of devotees—at present the most favoured, and quite supposed to be the holder of winning cards.

The captain was not long, however, before he secured an introduction, and presently, as the blaze of his gorgeous regimentals seemed to snuff the minor lights out altogether, they dropped off one by one, until only Joe had the pluck to retain his place near the lady of his love. Soon the first bars of a popular waltz were played by the band, and the captain, asking his fair partner if she danced, and receiving an acquiescing nod in reply, stood up with her, presently whirling her round the room in the very face of poor Joe, who sat with the hellish fires of jealousy eating at his very heartstrings, abjectly miserable, and vowing all manner of vengeance.

What the devil did it all matter to the captain? It was necessary that he should be amused by somebody or something ; it was, therefore, a matter of utter indifference to him whether it was the Duchess of Tartlet or a cheesemonger's daughter, so long as they kept him from being *ennuyed*, and thinking too much of his unpaid debts and frustrated gambling schemes. Here, then, was fair game, and, as Lizzie was not only very beautiful and graceful, but could chatter merrily enough without dropping her 'h's,' and, above all, let the captain see, as plain as man could, that he might flirt to his heart's content, he was not slow to improve the occasion. Before the evening was over he had squeezed her fingers fifty times, sending a flush to her fair face, and just before parting had drawn her swiftly to him among some tall palms and shrubs, and kissed her. The girl went home with that kiss burning upon her lips, and the very next day Joe Morton got his dismissal.





## CHAPTER VIII.

### JOE MORTON PLAYS HIS CARDS BADLY.

LIZZIE left the ballroom early, in compliance with the imperative command of her father, and went home in a blaze of enthusiastic triumph. Not a solitary thought did she give to poor Joe ; not a remembrance of his white, stricken face, with quivering lips and mouth, peeping out at her from a side door, as she sailed proudly down the broad stairs of the Assembly Rooms, did she permit herself. Fifty times upon her road home she told herself that flirting with the half-bred boors of Alcaston was now over. That was already a dream of the foolish past. A hundred times her thoughts wandered far away from her father's cramped little shop, until they settled upon a wide, fair expanse, of which the Alcaston Manor House was the centre, and she could fancy herself occupying a suite of the grand old tapestried rooms, with solemn, highly-respectable family servants at her beck and call. She thought of herself arrayed in Indian muslins of the finest texture, nestling luxuriously amongst a profusion of the softest eider cushions ; and, as Captain Welford's wife, occupying a position in that superb old establishment second only to the mistress of the household, who, as



Lizzie assured herself over and over again, could not hold a candle to her when it came to canvassing points of personal beauty. An idle dream, doubtless, and yet, as the girl argued, there was the audacious captain's kiss still lingering upon her full, pouting lips, together with faint traces of the odour of his scented moustache, so that heaven knows how high the girl's heart beat as she recollected that at the very last moment he had made her promise to meet him the following night under the Limes—a glorious avenue of venerable old trees, that led straight from the village church to the vicarage.

When she got home, her sister, a girl two years younger than herself, and giving promise of having almost as great a stock of good looks in time to come as Lizzie herself possessed, tried hard to get at the foundation of the elder girl's altered manner. She might just as well have tried to extract a history of its burial from an Egyptian mummy. Lizzie fenced right and left, parrying all the girl's eager queries with perfect ease, and without letting slip the faintest hint or sign that might have led to her secret being discovered. Most girls would have gone in for a gush of confidence with an only sister. Lizzie, unlike most girls, made Lottie a very partial confidante indeed. She told her of many of her escapades, 'tis true ; but some few, as being a trifle shady, she kept rigidly locked up in her own bosom. She had said but very little of Joe Morton—what little she had was anything but flattering to him. He was a boor, a mere animal ; decent-looking enough, she admitted, when he had got his best clothes on, and had freed his hands and hair from toil-stains and the dust of what she called 'the

horrid, beastly flour.' But that was all ; and the fact that he possessed, as she well knew, a heart true as steel itself, honour unsullied as the purest brilliant that ever graced a diadem, a disposition yielding as a little child's, were all very minor matters indeed. Still, she did not altogether shut her eyes to the fact that next to the squire up at the Manor House, Joe drove the best horses in Alcaston. Did not his big chestnut Tiptop win the Gold Cup at the Hunt Races ?—and her mother, besides, was everlastingly dinning in her ears that Joe's banking account was known to be getting heavier year after year. Why, he had put his name down for £100—the same as the squire did—for repairs to be done to the old church, and everybody spoke of him as the rich Mr. Morton, of Littlewash, so that, altogether, these things combined weighed somewhat heavily with 'our Lizzie,' dear girl, and she smiled sweetly upon her amiable mother, showing the full glory of her exquisitely-shaped mouth and perfect teeth, when the lady was wont to say before the eventful night of the Hunt Ball, that she should come to see her as the mistress of Littlewash Farm before she died, yet.

Lizzie, indeed, thought it was highly probable she would ; but, if she did think so, she kept her ideas very much to herself, and said but little. However, as we have said, the night of the ball found Joe routed, and an enemy in full possession of the camp, so that Lottie's question fell as seed upon the barrenest of barren stubbles. And yet it bore fruit, for Lizzie blazed up on the instant.

'Joe Morton !' she cried, in answer to a question put to her by her sister, while her mouth wreathed itself into lines

of the keenest contempt ; ‘ Joe Morton, indeed ! pray never speak to me of that man again ; and try to recollect, Lottie, once for all, that if I ever do marry it will be with some one far and away in advance of all the Joe Mortons in the world.’

‘ Ha ! another pretty little quarrel, I see,’ answered the girl, with a toss of her head ; ‘ and I suppose Joe will be here in the morning with another brooch or a locket, and perhaps a bag of sweets ; and so you’ll make it up again. A parcel of childish nonsense ; I’m sick of it all, really. Are you going to have any supper ? Father will be at home in ten minutes.’

‘ No,’ answered Lizzie languidly ; ‘ I don’t seem to care about supper. I’ve something to think about of far more importance than supper. Where’s mother ?’

‘ Gone to bed hours ago with an attack of the old complaint, neuralgia ; and here have I been sitting all alone by myself since father went to the Crown. ‘ Lively, ain’t it ?’ and she looked round the small, yet cosily-furnished room, with an air of weariness, rather sad to see in one so young.

‘ Don’t I wish Joe Morton would come after me instead of you, Liz,’ said the girl dreamily, while she sat with her dimpled chin resting on the palm of her hand. ‘ I’ll warrant I didn’t play the fool with him, as you’re doing ; such a place as he’s got, too. I declare it’s next to the Hall itself, for anywhere round Alcaston. By-the-bye, do you know that Captain Welford’s here ?’

‘ I know it as well as you do, and perhaps better,’ she answered carelessly. ‘ As to the Mill, well, it’s all very well, but I must say I prefer the Hall : personally, I suppose I may ; and if I do, then you can captivate Joe. I believe

you're half in love with his pasty face and flour-dressed hair already.'

'You prefer the Hall ! Do you indeed, my lady ! Well, I do like that, upon my word. Is it a case of spoons with the new London footman, then, or what, sweet child ? Upon my honour, that's about the best thing I've heard you say yet, Liz. Oh, go on, child ! in due course of time you'll be famous ;' and the younger sister, raising her fair head to have a good look at Lizzie, laughed long and joyously.

'Hark ! there's father coming. I'm off to bed, Lottie, at once. Pray don't come lumbering upstairs in your usual style. I don't want to be awake all night. Good-night !'

'Good-night, sister mine ! and dream of the fairy prince and the glories of Alcaston Manor, be sure.'

The door closed upon the retreating form of the elder sister just as Jabez Ardron, the father, came in from the little shop entrance to the small room.

'That girl come in yet ?' he asked, in surly tones, as he entered. 'Where's your mother ?'

'Mother and Lizzie are both in bed, father,' replied his daughter. 'Mother's had a bad attack of neuralgia again, and was in bed by nine.'

'Humph ! Always some'at. If she hadn't got neuralgia she'd ha' got earache, and if she hadn't got that she'd ha' bin at chapel, I suppose ; or a tea-fight, and a Dorcas meeting of matrons afterwards. Never saw such a woman in my born days yet. Here, give me my pipe, and get you gone to bed. I'll shut up.'

The girl reached a long, thin clay pipe down from a shelf, placing it at his elbow without speaking, then lit her candle,

and simply saying, 'Good-night, father!' to which her parent did not deem it necessary to reply, went straight up to her room.

Jabez Ardron sat placidly puffing at his pipe for a good quarter of an hour; but at last, putting it down with a weary yawn, he got up to see that the shop-shutters were all right, and the place secure against possible marauders. Not much fear of that, however. One might have left all one's worldly goods and 'portable property' loose in any one room of any one of the Alcaston houses, the front doors wide open, and it would have been assuredly as safe as if the Bank of England had had it in its custody.

Then the house was hushed, and nothing more dreadful was heard through the long night than the sustained snore of worthy Jabez, tired with a hard day's work, and dreaming restlessly, as his slumbers were rendered feverish and light under the influence of the Crown's bad gin and worse tobacco.

In the morning the shop was opened, and the shutters stored under a shelf in the back garden upon which Jabez kept his bees, by Jerry Grimes, a dull, half-witted lad upon all ordinary occasions, but one whom Lizzie said could be sharp enough if he liked, and who followed the older of the two girls about, apparently distraught by the loveliness of her face and the soft yielding lines of her undulating form, with the placid obedience of a docile sheep-dog.

Jerry was softly whistling to himself as an aid to the exciting process of taking down the shutters, when a figure crossed the wide, open market-place from the George doorway opposite, and came straight to where the lad was stand-

ing, shading his eyes from the rays of hot sun and watching the evolutions of a flight of pigeons, wheeling back and forth over the tops of the houses. The man crossed over the road very lightly, shod as he was in patent-leather boots, without disturbing the boy's meditations, and having his coat—of the black frock order—buttoned tightly up to his chin.

'Jerry, my lad, are the young ladies down yet?' queried this new arrival.

'Ey! Lord ha' mercy, Muster Morton, is it thee? Why whatten name o' the Lord has ta been doing? Thy eyes are as red as a rat's.'

'Never mind my eyes, Jerry. Is Miss Lizzie down yet? that's what I want to know;' and his voice sounded husky and broken with anxiety.

'No, she bean't, and wunna be for an hour or more; but if thee wants her, Muster Morton, I'll go round to the back and wakken her oop; I knaws where she sleeps, bless ye: and, I say, may I come a-fishin' in thy pool? I've wanted to ask you ever so many times——'

'Yes, lad, as often as you like. And now listen to me; when Miss Lizzie comes down will you give her this letter into her own hands? Mind; into her own hands, Jerry—and there's half-a-crown for you.'

'Aye; I will, muster. Thankee, and I'll come a-fishin' to-morrow.'

'Very well; but don't make any mistake with the letter, because it is of importance; and be sure and give it to her yourself.' And so saying, Joe Morton of Littlewash, with haggard set face and hands tightly clenched behind him, turned down the street, while the lad watched him until he

crossed the bridge spanning the river, and took the road leading direct to the mill. Joe had never been to bed, but had been all night planning the letter, which he had now left for the perusal of the woman whom he thought loved him. Whether she did or no, time alone will show.

Ten minutes afterwards Jabez came down, looking dull and unrefreshed with his night's rest ; and next Lottie, a sweetly pretty girl just bursting into womanhood, fresh as a rose, yet with none of the queenly grace of the elder sister, and intent upon getting a cup of tea for her mother.

'Miss Lottie, Miss Lottie,' whispered Jerry in a mysterious way from the cover of the back of his hand, as soon as he saw worthy Jabez crossing the road to get his morning draught at the Crown, 'there's bin somebody here.'

'What do you mean, you donkey?' said Lottie, instantly treating him to a hearty shake by the thread of his ragged collar. 'Bin somebody here—who's bin?'

'Why, Muster Morton, an' he wor rare and grand, in shiny thin boots and his best coat, an' his eyes was all red like they ferrets, an' his hair towzled awful.'

'Well, what of it? what did he want?'

'Gin me a billy-ducks he did for Miss Lizzie, and a half-crown.'

'Oh, you born donkey! A billy-ducks! What do you mean, you wretched boy?'

'Why, like that play-actor said—a billy-ducks or billy-drakes, or some'at, meanin' a letter—and I worn't to gin it to nobody but her, and I ain't a-goin' to.'

'Who asked you, idiot? I'll run up and tell my sister. She'll be down in a minute; stop where you are.'

Away she flew, and in two minutes Lizzie came on the scene, her glorious brown hair all loose and unconfined and straying in sweet disorder over the folds of a scarlet cloak which she had wrapped round her supple form. If anything, this negligent attire heightened her peerless beauty, for the scarlet cloak, grasped by her white and delicate hand, exposed the folds of her white night-drapery, with its edging of real lace, and more than a tiny peep of a full round throat and snowy bosom.

‘Jerry, Jerry! give me my letter directly,’ she cried imperiously.

‘Here you be, miss. Law! don’t you look lovely! you looks jist like one of them red angels on the big church windows!’ and the boy’s trembling tones told at once that he meant what he said.

‘Breakfast ready, there, Lottie,’ cried Jabez from the little shop, refreshed and brisk with his quencher of ale.

‘In ten minutes, father. The rasher’s going on beautifully, and I’m just putting the eggs on.’

‘Well, don’t boil ’em hard, then. I hate hard-boiled eggs more than overdone liver and bacon. Jerry!’

‘Sir!’

‘Get that salt out, and cut it up into squares first thing, and then fill the sugar-drawers—both of ’em, mind, loaf and moist. Couple o’ cheeses up from the cellar, two or three tubs o’ butter—and now for breakfast!’

In the meantime Lizzie had regained her bedroom, where two minutes afterwards she was deep in the perusal of Joe’s letter.





## CHAPTER IX.

### A FRIENDLY CONFERENCE.

SOMEBODY or other possessed of very strict views will look horrified if we ask our readers to accompany us straight to Lizzie's bedroom. No necessity for it, however, we assure you, and therefore everybody's indignation, real or assumed, can be bottled up at once. It was a simply furnished, plain little room, its whole accessories being an oaken wardrobe standing in one corner, half a dozen handboxes piled one on the other, in another a daintily fitted-up dressing-table—daintily fitted so far as hangings of muslin tastefully arranged could make it—with a few ornaments and women's knick-knacks scattered about. There was a gold neck-chain, a turquoise ring and ear-pendants, in the shape of half-open pea-pods, the peas themselves being pearls—poor Joe's gift—some bows and ends of mauve ribbon, a little jar of faded rose-leaves, and a Bible. The bed itself was a plain iron bedstead, standing in the centre of the room; and now, with the scarlet cloak dropped, and showing the round, fair shoulders, partially hidden with the glorious drapery of her bonny brown hair, there sat dear Lizzie, her blue eyes shaded by their long silken lashes, her fair, sweetly pensive

face slightly flushed, one naked foot—as charming as ever woman’s foot was yet fashioned—and from which her slipper had dropped, swinging idly back and forth, and altogether with an air of half-amused yet scornful interest pervading her features, she was attentively reading Joe’s letter. It ran very much in this wise :

‘ Thursday—two o’clock in the morning.

‘ MY DARLING,

‘ I may perhaps never call you my darling again, and you will, I know, forgive me. None but myself and Almighty God knows how dearly I have loved you ; none but He and I know at this moment how great is my misery.

‘ It rests with you to make me a happy man or mar my life for ever. It is true that you have never promised in so many words to marry me ; but I fought Joe Gillinghurst for your sake, and since then he and I have been friends, because you told Joe you could not make up your mind to see him again.

‘ One night in Beckett’s Piece—do you recollect it, Lizzie ?—I told you how dearly I loved you.

‘ Oh, my darling !—my darling !—I love you as man never loved woman before. I feel your breath warm upon my cheek, and I tremble. I think I hear your dress rustling near me, and I would fain clasp you to my bosom ; and you, that night, Lizzie, kissed me, and bade me hope ! Hope ! I have lived on hope ; slept with hope fluttering at my heart ever since. Until last night I was the happiest man in all Alcaston, for I hoped. Now, no dog could be more wretched, for I have lost hope, and, in losing it, I seem, my darling, to be losing you.

‘ Who is this man that has come between you and me ? I know him better than you do, and I warn you have nothing to do with him. He cares nothing for you, Lizzie,

in reality, and you'll rue the day you fancy so. I heard you promise to meet him in the Lime Walk this night. By the great God above us, if you do, he or I dies. One or the other must clear the path for him who's left. If it is I who go, I shall only miss you till we meet in the other world, and he will be your ruin. If he goes—God help me!—I shall have murdered him.

'I entreat you, Lizzie, by the memory of that moonlit night when you kissed me—ah, sweet hour!—and bade me hope, keep away from the Limes this night.

'You have half promised to be my wife. Oh, my love! I will work my fingers bare to the very bone for you, and give you all that can make you happy. I hold you to that half promise, and I pray you keep away from the Limes. Send Jerry with a line for me, and let me know that I am still

'Your own true lover,

'JOSEPH MORTON.'

'Perfect nonsense!' said Lizzie, as she folded up Joe's letter slowly and reflectively; 'perfect nonsense! Why, the man's a madman. As to his threatening to murder the captain,' she added, the while a contemptuous smile stole round the curves of her beautiful mouth, 'I don't know, of course, but I should be inclined to think the captain's very well able to take care of himself. Rubbish! I shall go to the Limes to-night for all the Joe Mortons in the world!'

And she meant it, for there never was a more heartless yet beautiful devil. There never yet beat in woman's bosom a more frigid, stony, utterly selfish heart than that which pulsed in the bosom of Lucy Ardron.

How slowly dragged the day through for this impatient

girl, burning with ardour to meet the gallant captain ! She dressed lazily and slowly, hating the very hours as they dragged their halting way. Then she went down to the little breakfast-room, and absorbed tea meditatively, the while she munched crisp toast as in a dream.

Presently her mother appeared on the everyday scene, and she being a new arrival on this, our stage, we must introduce her in due form. She was an admirably worthy lady, with a dark, swarthy complexion, large dreamy eyes, a long straight-cut nose, her head bound up in a cotton handkerchief, and still a martyr to neuralgia. A great peculiarity about this worthy good soul was that, despite a strong leaning towards the soothing ministrations of the Rev. Caleb Spool, and the holifying influence of tea meetings, in conjunction with much cutting out and shaping of flannel petticoats, designed for the worldly comfort of some of the village unsaved, her mind was as full of earthly vanities as any woman in Alcaston. She would not have stirred out of the house on a Sunday morning, when the Rev. Caleb's chapel bell was raising its usual monotonous and heart-breaking din, unless she had been perfectly well assured that the fit of her dress and the fall of her shawl were faultless, and her bonnet ribbons tied correctly to the very fraction of an inch. Another singularity about her was that at the many tea-meetings held in the village, and at which the worthy lady was a constant attendant, no one ever saw her drink warm tea without shutting her eyes and elevating her very well-shaped eyebrows, a process which gave most people the impression that, even in such a small matter as the imbibition of tea, Mrs. Ardron was engaged in

holy meditations. The only thing that at all disturbed the idea was that at the end of every gulp her eyes slowly opened ; while at the commencement of a fresh one they shut again like a rat-trap.

Handsome eyes they were too, and Mrs. Ardron knew perfectly well how to use them to advantage. Sometimes, and particularly when under the influence of extra good gunpowder or bohea, they would swim with a kind of dreamy melancholy. At others, and notably when Jabez came home somewhat husky of speech and thick of utterance from the Crown, they would flash and glitter in the lamplight ominously enough, giving one the idea that, when she liked, Mrs. Ardron could be a vixen.

Neither of the girls resembled the mother much, save that Lizzie's lovely blue orbs, shaded as they were by long silken lashes, bore at times an expression of the same half-sleepy repose ; but when she lifted the downcast lids, and looked straight into a listener's eyes, there was an indescribable half-slumbering fire dimly reflected there, from the effects whereof, if he were a man, he generally trembled from head to foot, and felt, as poor Joe said, anyhow ; and if it were a girl, the owner of the beauteous eyes got thoroughly well hated nine times out of ten, and simply for their excessive loveliness.

'Better, I hope, mother?' said Lizzie lazily, as she lounged back in an American rocking-chair, with a yellow-bound novel in her hand, upon the elder woman's entering the room.

'Ah, my dear child, better, yes ; I had a little hot rum, dear, the last thing, but I shall never get real peace in this

world until it pleases the Lord to take me to Abraham's bosom ! Oh, what heavenly rapture ! And now tell me about the ball. Who was there, and what did they have on ?' and the good motherly creature, sitting down close to her daughter's side, patted her dimpled cheek, and then folding her hands decorously, sat in an attitude of calm expectation.

'Heaven only knows, mother—I don't !' said the girl, with a weary sigh. 'Everybody was there as far as I could see, and that horrid Mrs. Day—a wretched old crocodile—included. She was figged out in that yellow dress again that she wore at Christmas, looking for all the world like a faded sunflower. It's really disgraceful to see a woman of her age going to balls and such-like, with one foot in the grave and the other on the edge !'

'Very shocking, my dear, doubtless,' replied her mother demurely, and with a fine upward roll of her expressive eyes. 'But then you know Mrs. Day wouldn't mind being in the position you mention so long as there was a man on the brink, who'd give her a kiss while he held her up by the back hair. Fanny Day always was a shocking flirt, and a hanger-on to men's coat-tails. Faugh ! catch me, indeed, after the selfish pigs—there's your father at the Crown again—and so she always will be to the end of the chapter.'

'And fifty if she's a day,' cried the younger woman, with supreme contempt in the tone of her voice and the arch of her pretty eyebrows. 'And yet folks have the impudence to call me a flirt. Me, of all girls in the world !'

'Ah ! there always will be scandal in Alcaston, my dear. Take no notice ! I heard of some wretched old person

saying that when that dear Mr. Sprool gave us the kiss of peace and goodwill—and very proper, too—at that meeting the other night for sending out seidlitz powders and fuller's earth to the suffering heathen—the latter for the babies, my dear—that all the women kissed him back again. I know the scandalmonger ; it was that infamous, worthless Mrs. Jones, who didn't get kissed because she was sitting so far back, you know. And if they did, I don't wonder at it, for his discourse brings us all straight to the golden gates, and his whiskers are scented lovely. But, my dear, you haven't told me who was there—Mr. Morton, of course, of Littlewash. Ah, my darling, the future mistress of those lovely horses of his, I know !' and the mother's eyes beamed radiantly on the daughter's sweet face—a trifle clouded, perhaps, at the mention of Joe's name.

'See here, mother !' she cried suddenly, with a petulant shrug of her finely-shaped shoulders, 'I never want to hear Joe's name again ; I never cared for him at the best of times, and now less than ever. Listen while I tell you a secret—a secret, mind, that Lottie even must not know of—will you keep it ?' she asked eagerly.

'If it is consistent with right and proper feelings, and the teachings of godly religion, my dear, most certainly,' returned the other demurely, while her eyes closed softly as if under the influence of hot tea.

'Bother religion !' snapped our dear Lizzie, with an impatient gesture. 'Don't talk rubbish to me, mother, please. It's hard of digestion.'

'Oh, Lizzie darling, be careful ! Never mock at religion ; no good ever came of it.'

‘I know it ; and no good ever came of it as a profession. Better by half have no sense of religion at all than profess it if you don’t really feel it here,’ and the girl tapped the bosom of her dress impatiently. ‘As for you, mother, I dare say you fancy that it’s deep-seated enough, and that the tree of salvation is full of fruit cherry-ripe ; but you’ll forgive me if I say I don’t quite agree with you.’

‘Well, I’m sure ! that my own child——’ she began in high tones.

‘Come, mother,’ said the girl, checking her at once, ‘let us have no heroics, for goodness’ sake. Apart from any question of the Rev. Caleb—a good man, I’ve no doubt, although he squints frightfully—will you keep my secret and advise me ?’

‘Yes !’ said her mother, resuming her former attitude. ‘And now what is it ?’

‘Well,’ she began diffidently, and as she talked her lips, ripe and pouting as the side of a sunny peach, began gradually to soften into a smile, ‘I met Captain Welford last night, and he paid me a very great deal of attention. Told me, the stupid donkey, that he had never seen so lovely a woman in his life before. Begged me to meet him to-night in the Lime Walk, as he had something of the utmost importance to tell me, and I promised him I would. Joe was there, of course, with his mouth wide open, and gaping about as usual, and close to my elbow ; and when I danced with the captain—oh ! such a lovely waltz, mother !—Master Joe must needs sit glowering at us like a smitten tiger. Then he has written me a letter this morning—dated two o’clock, if you please, the great noodle—begging and entreating me



not to see the captain. Threatening all sorts of awful things, too—not but what the captain is very well able to take care of himself, I should think—a cavalry soldier, too! and I want to know what I'm to do. I do really believe he's head over ears in love with me, the stupid ninny! and I must confess that Mrs. Captain Welford reads much nicer than Mrs. Joe Morton. Now then?

'An awkward position, my dear Lizzie—my dearest child,' said her mother, putting out her hand to caress the fair head, an act of motherly affection which was instantly met by a snappish 'Don't, mother,' on the part of her offspring. 'And so you really think the captain's hit?' she queried.

'I do—hard; very hard. Now, shall I go?'

'Perhaps, under all the circumstances. Ah, poor, poor Joe,' wailed the kindly lady, the while she put her handkerchief to the corner of a perfectly dry and glittering eye. 'Yes,' slowly and reflectively; 'perhaps you had better. Mrs. Captain Welford,' she added, softly and musingly. 'Very pretty, my dear; and while you are with him, oh, take care, my child! I shall be at chapel, and will pray for you.'

'Then I go, mother, eh?' said the girl slowly, and looking her mother full in the face. 'Hush! my child; here's your father. On the whole, yes;' and the elder woman, holding the red handkerchief to her face, quietly left the room and went straight upstairs, afterwards kneeling down at her bedside to ask a blessing on her loved child, who at dusk, she knew, was to meet a *roué*, a debauched profligate, in the cool, shady recesses of the Lime Walk.



## CHAPTER X.

### UNDER THE LIMES.

ACROSS the little bridge which Joe had taken on his homeward way in the morning, and one came to a low, lichen-covered wall, in many places broken down and crumbling under the hand of Time. Years ago—ages even—and this wall had protected the inmates of an ancient monastic house from the gaze and scrutiny of irreverent passers-by. Time, however, had, in its onward march, swept all, save some old, tottering foundation walls and one of the ruined towers of the great building, into the unseen Past. Thus, year by year, an immense crop of grass was cut from the same land which had in past time echoed to the shuffle of sandalled feet and the lowly sweep of coarse frieze gowns, in which it was said the Black Friars were wont to invest themselves.

An enterprising farmer who had taken this ancient site had planted it full of apples and damsons, from which he himself reaped little, if any, benefit, but from which his descendants would, in time to come, probably gather the fruit of his enterprise. Through the very heart of this wild waste ran a portion of the Lime Walk, a grand avenue of wondrous old trees, the like of which could not be met with for miles round.

It was not everyone who cared to go through the Lime Walk after dusk, the popular impression with sundry of the more superstitious folks being that some of the dead monks, resting unquietly hard by, were wont, particularly when the fruit was being carried, to get out of their graves and enjoy a moonlight ramble. Old Dame Higgins, indeed, had declared, over and over again, that on one occasion, when she was going to see a son of hers who was ill—a keeper occupying the lodge at present in Miller's possession—she had met an old man habited in cowl and gown, whose face was no bigger than a saucer, and whose bright eyes, glowing like flames under his hood, were as big as cheeses. This gentleman was popularly supposed to have said to the dame, on his passing, 'A sack o' twist, mam?' which expression Mrs. Higgins believed bore reference to some tobacco which she was taking to her son for the purpose of chewing—an inveterate habit of his—and which she immediately threw away, fearing that it might be bewitched.

How the good old dame accounted for the apparent impossibility of eyes of the size described being set in a face of the circumference of a saucer has never been clearly explained. Far be it from the chronicler of the present history to suggest that she never saw anything at all, or that perhaps she had laced her tea too tightly. The only suggestion that he may perhaps throw out being in favour of the vicar's explanation of the expression supposed to have been used by the priestly vision, and as one more likely to be correct, viz., that in reality it had no reference to the tobacco at all, but was simply *Pax vobiscum*—a priestly method of greeting.

As there were no school boards nor pedantic critics in those days, Mrs. Higgins may easily be pardoned.

Thus the Lime Walks, in all the grandeur of its venerable solemn beauty, extended in a straight line for a quarter of a mile, and led direct from the town to the church on the Burton road ; and it was in reality at the entrance to the churchyard, amid the dim silence of its spreading yews and overarching elms, that the captain had made tryst with Lizzie Ardron.

The background to the Lime Walk, was, of course, the foliated outline of undulating woods, but between openings in the trees there were piled-up ridges of coppery-edged clouds, deepening from stormy-looking, thunderous indigo, to utterly tempestuous black, amidst which tiny flickerings of pale light every now and then seemed to presage a coming storm.

Captain Welford sat on the broad-topped stile, faultlessly got up in loose, easy dress, every hair of his carefully trained, drooping moustache in its place, and with a look of half-amused expectancy in the light of his handsome and expressive grey eyes. Yes, a handsome, graceful, indolent-looking fellow ; and just the sort of man towards whom at first sight his own sex felt an indefinite interest, while the other, or at any rate all save the very best trained of the school, experienced a strange, subtle fluttering at their bosoms, an experience which in time to come might rank as dangerous. Every now and again, however, as he carelessly puffed out rings and curls of smoke, which hung idly floating in the motionless air, a close observer would have noticed certain curious lines and curves about the face

and mouth, and the droop of the heavily-fringed eyelids, that gave one the impression that the man before him was not quite a gentleman—not ‘thorough,’ in fact—and that at a pinch he might be found capable of doing certain things at which his brother George would have simply recoiled with horror.

And so it was. The elder of the brothers, with high-toned principles and a keen tense of moral right, was a very prince of a man ; the younger, judged from the same point of view, was a serf.

As he sat idly smoking, and switching at the fallen leaves with a slight rattan cane, an old man passed him on his way home to the village—simply a hedger and ditcher, ’tis true, a bent, withered old fellow, followed close at his heels by a vagrant-looking terrier. With the invariable and somewhat obsequious courtesy of the English peasant towards ‘the quality,’ the old fellow touched his hat, as he bade the captain good-night. Had the dashing cavalry officer been one of the stone mailed figures quietly lying at full length, with hands piously folded, amongst the marble slabs and brasses under the shadow of the great stained window, he could not have taken less notice of the old man’s respectful salutation. Had it been George, now, why up would have gone his hand to his hat as certainly as if his accoster had been a duke. This little incident just shows the difference between the two men, and accounts for the prevailing impression in the village, that while the one man was ‘a rale gentleman, every inch of him, t’other wor a pig.’

Raising his eyes to watch the old man when he had passed, he suddenly caught sight of Lizzie’s tall, graceful

figure coming down the Lime Walk to meet him. In an instant all the lazy indolence of his manner was gone, and, throwing away his cigar, he walked somewhat more quickly than was his wont towards her, noting the excessive grace of the girl's carriage, and a slight half-bashful droop of the queenly head with admiring eye. This time there was no mistake about his hat coming off; indeed, he stood bare-headed before her for half a minute, as she, with her glorious blue eyes still riveted on the ground, stood with the tell-tale blood surging up to her throat and neck, and amongst the wavy masses of her brown hair.

'Dear Miss Ardron,' he commenced—'No, I may call you Lizzie, may I not? It is my favourite name, too—this is very kind of you.'

'And very wrong and foolish, too, I'm afraid, Captain Welford,' she rejoined.

'Wrong! My dear child, what nonsense! Wrong to meet a man who from the very first instant he saw you felt the utmost interest in you! Really, I cannot tell you how thankful I am. You are the one only woman in this horrible hole worth talking to. By all the saints the most beautiful woman I ever met, and you have been gracious enough to come to chat with me. Accept my best and most ardent thanks,' and, raising her neatly-gloved hand, he gracefully bowed his head—a head covered with crisp chestnut curls—and, pressing his lips to the fingers very gently, he then drew her hand across his arm, prepared to lounge in either way she desired.

They faced the town again, as being more assured of seclusion, and he began to talk to her about the ball.

‘By-the-bye, Lizzie,’ he said at length, and looking at her with a sidelong glance from under cover of his long lashes, ‘who was that *gauche* individual with the large hands and feet, who kept perpetually hovering near you at the hop last night? You must recollect him—a man with big, staring eyes and ill-fitting clothes—rather gave one the impression of an undertaker, by the cut of his tie—was he an undertaker?’

‘I hardly know to whom you refer,’ said the girl, although she knew as well or better than he that it was true-hearted absent Joe who was being talked about.

‘Ha! rather glad of it—I thought at one time there might have been some little tenderness between you, from the expression of his eyes. Looked a little mad, I thought—riled, perhaps, is the better expression—and, perhaps, accountable for by the fact that he had been tipping freely. Lizzie,’ he said very suddenly, and facing her at the same instant, ‘do you know that you are a very lovely woman?’

‘Oh, Captain Welford, pray don’t!’ she began. ‘If you have anything to say, pray say it without compliments. To me they always sound so full of insincerity.’

‘Impossible, darling baby—I’ve got an awful lot to say, and, primarily, it being no compliment, but the simple truth, I must insist that you are very lovely—the sweetest woman—hear me naiads, fauns, or other spirits of these misty groves—that I ever met in my life, and that is my sole excuse for telling you that from the instant I first saw you, I felt for you what I never felt for a woman in my life before;’ and at this instant he quickly slid his arm round her supple waist, drawing her slightly towards him,

‘And what is that, Captain Welford?’ she said in low tones, the while she halfrepulsed, half yielded to, the pressure of his encircling arm.

‘A love, Lizzie dearest, that I hope may surmount every obstacle,’ he rejoined, while his moustache approached dangerously near to the lobe of her perfectly shaped ear. ‘A love that—Devil take it ! here’s that beastly undertaker !’

It was indeed Joe, walking slowly towards them down the Lime Walk, with his hands crossed behind his back, and his eyes taking in quietly all the features of the interesting situation.

‘What shall I do?’ cried Lizzie, in an agony of doubt and fear, and for the moment, as she thought of Joe’s threatening letter, fairly frightened.

‘Do !’ ejaculated the captain, his eyes flashing ominously, ‘do ! What do you mean ? Has this man——’

‘Hush ! Yes,’ said the girl, half sobbing, while her face, writhed with misery, showed she felt keenly the painful position she was placed in. ‘Listen ! listen, for heaven’s sake, and advise me for the best. I have half promised to marry this man. You have told me you love me, and so much I will believe, just as I know you to be an officer and a gentleman. But that is not sufficient. If you really love me, do you intend to make me your wife ? Quick ! let me know before he comes !’

‘’Pon my honour, darling,’ he replied, smiling composedly at her distress, ‘an awkward question ; so sudden, so frightfully sudden.’

‘Enough, Captain Welford,’ she said quietly, and in dignified tones, at once trying hard to regain her composure ;



'I know exactly what to do ;' and at this moment Joe came up to them.

Raising his felt hat to Lizzie, but without taking any further notice of her, he addressed Welford at once.

'You know this lady, of course, sir?' Joe half falteringly began.

'Yes, a little I do,' drawled Welford insolently, and looking Morton over from head to foot. 'Hope to do better by-and-by. None of our family are in want of shrouds or coffins at present, my good man ; but if you'll give me your card I'll remember you when we do.'

'I don't quite understand you, Captain Welford. You see I know you, if you dunnat know me. My name is Morton, of Littlewash Mill, not very far from here, and the lady you are with is my promised wife. Now, sir,' and he suddenly wound up his answer with a flash of his indignant eye, 'how's that?'

'Not an undertaker after all, then?' cried the captain softly, and tapping the point of his foot gently with his cane. 'Dear me, what a pity ! Well, with regard to flour, now. The Baltic's open, and I'm told the American supply is increasing, so that, even if we have a bad harvest, I suppose starvation can be staved off.'

'Yes ; but not in the same way as you are trying to stave me off,' said Joe, with a slight ring in the tone of his clear voice. 'I have told you, sir, that that lady—Lizzie, my girl,' said he suddenly, with a world of sorrowful pity in his throat, 'you'd best go home.'

She took no notice, and stood with tears gathering slowly in her eyes.

‘I have told you,’ he continued, ‘that that lady is my intended wife. Had she not half promised, mind ye, captain, I should not be here now.’

And at this point Joe suddenly stopped.

‘Well, my good miller,’ cried the captain in merry, jocular tones, while he struck a vesuvian and lighted another of the black cabanas, ‘proceed. Why buogle? Strange characteristic of millers, they always bungle. Have a weed?’

Joe took no notice of him, but blurted suddenly out :

‘Si’ thee here, captain ! that poor girl as you’ve been trying to trick, thou hound, for thou’rt na better, she’s crying. Dost ta’ hear, my poor girl’s crying, and by Heaven the sight of her tears nearly drives me mad ! I love her so dearly, that for her dear sake I would lay my neck down for you to put thy foot on if it would do her any good ; and if it will make her any happier I’ll do more. God help me ! I’ll—I’ll—give her up to thee. Si’ tha’ ! I’m a man,’ he cried, with impetuous haste. ‘If she loves thee, captain—or fancies she does—better than she could do me, and you’ll promise me and Almighty God now that you’ll marry her and treat her kindly—aye, promise me, laddie, man to man, face to face—I’ll give her up, and never see her darling face again,’ and Joe’s firm voice trembled piteously.

‘My dear miller,’ said the captain, slowly blowing out a thin wreath of smoke, and watching it critically as it floated away, ‘I never make rash promises ! But what a shocking thing it is for you to bury yourself here. Go up to London, my dear fellow, for goodness’ sake, take my card, and call on the manager at the Vic. Just do that little scene over again before him, will you ? All the “Si’ thees” and magni-

ficent heroics generally. All about being a man—mind, don't leave that out—and putting your ugly neck down as an impromptu doormat, d'ye see ; and, damn it, your fortune's made ! Why, my jovial clodhopper, you're a made man. As it is, believe me,' he added, with a curling lip and quivering nostril, 'it is utterly thrown away. You don't believe it ? Well, ask Lizzie.'

'Then you will not promise ?'

'Not quite, miller,' came the reply, slowly and distinctly, between sundry composed puffs from his cigar, the smoker at the same time eyeing his weed with an admiring glance as proof of its excellence.

'Well, then, I will. I'll promise to marry her and work my fingers to the bone for her to make her happy.'

'Not difficult, that, miller ; you've got such shocking bad nails.'

'Maybe, captain. But let me tell thee what else I've got. I've got a fist as shall pound every bone in your body to a jelly in five minutes if you don't go. Come, now,' he shouted. 'Heads up, soldier ! right about wheel, eyes right, quick march ! or by the heaven above us I'll throw you clean over that hedge.'

'Vigorous miller, burly beast !' he said, while his moustache bristled with rage ; 'I'll not tempt you just now, but will wait for a better and more fitting opportunity, which rest assured will come. Do have a weed, though, before I go. Miss Ardron, loveliest woman, I leave you to find comfort in discussing the flour trade. *Addio !*' and, raising his hat, he sauntered slowly down the Lime Walk, cutting at the heads of the nettles and tall weeds savagely with his stick.

Joe watched him until the slight, handsome figure was lost amidst the swiftly gathering evening shades—watched him so far and so long, that the silence, broken only by the low sobs of the girl still standing motionless in the middle of the dim pathway, became almost unbearable. At last he turned to speak to his love, but as that conversation proved to be one of the hinges upon which this tale is hung, it may perhaps be worth while to give it the dignity of a fresh chapter.





## CHAPTER XI.

### JOE'S APPEAL.

SILENCE reigned supreme in the misty shades of the Lime Walk—silence, broken only by a low, muffled sob at intervals, sounding almost like far-distant minute-guns fired by a ship's crew in distress, breaking from the bosom of the sorrowing girl, and the far-away grumbling notes of distant thunder. It was intensely hot, with a close, heavy atmosphere, heralding the coming storm, and presently a nightingale from somewhere, deeply hidden in the leafy recesses, even as though he had had a knowledge of the crooked paths into which Joe's true passion for the lovely woman by his side had been lately running, commenced a song of liquid melody, running over with the sacred fire of love, and infusing fresh courage into Joe's aching bosom.

'Lizzie !' said he, at length, and his voice sounded ominously low and hoarse with suppressed emotion.

No answer.

'Lizzie !' again he said, and this time he placed his broad, yet shapely hand in kindly fashion on the girl's shrinking shoulder.

'Don't !' she snapped, pettishly drawing her shoulder away ; and then the fair brown head drooped a little lower,

and a fresh chorus of muffled sobs proceeded from the interior of the lace-edged handkerchief—one of a half-dozen that Joe had given her, too, and which she held tightly clasped before her face.

Conscious of his late victory over the gallant captain, and perhaps a little proud of it, Joe was yet tolerably clear upon the point—knowing very little of the innocent, guileless ways of women in general—that this very shrinking away from his touch must be looked upon as a veritable nose-ender—a knock-down blow, in fact. Had he been a good judge, he would have boldly stormed the fortress at once, and taking the chance of getting his hair or whiskers pulled, taken coy Lizzie to his bosom, and having told his tale o'er again, smothered her in kisses. Joe, however, was a bad judge, so he didn't, and stood speechless.

All in due time he again plucked up courage, saying, in slightly lugubrious fashion, and with excessive bad tact :

'If anyone is to be angry, my girl, I think it's me should. You cannot justify yourself in coming flaunting here to-night with that cowardly, scented hound, and now when my heart is half breaking at seeing you crying in this way, and I want to tell you how I love and forgive you, you snap my head off.'

'Snap your head off!' she cried suddenly, and turning her handsome tear-stained face, with blazing blue orbs, full upon Joe. 'Snap your head off, indeed! Do you call yourself a man to let that fellow go away like that, and after grossly insulting me? Had I been you I would have broken every bone in his skin.'

'Jug-jug-jug,' carolled the nightingale, bonny bird of love, and Joe was more mystified than ever. He could not see

that shy, sweet Lizzie, after biting scores of others, had got the least little bit of a snap herself, and feeling the wound and the bitterness of humility in its consequent exposure, thirsted for nothing so much as revenge.

‘Why, my dear,’ he began, ‘I—I—thought—I fancied perhaps as you wouldn’t like——’

‘You thought, you fancied!’ she hissed, turning full upon him. ‘Joe Morton, you’re a fool!—there!—and I hate you!—I hate you! I’ll never speak to you any more!’ and Lizzie’s eyes shone as a steel blade, while her shapely head erect, and hands tightly clenched behind her back, showed her exquisite figure in all its lithe proportions.

Again the low, sweet carol of the melodious bird of eve filled the silent groves, while the girl’s supple figure swayed slowly back and forth in her anger, and then as suddenly her head bent down to hide a torrent of fresh tears—terrible weapons these to men not used to them, and keener than lance-points of the best-tempered steel.

‘For heaven’s sake, don’t cry, Lizzie darling! you’ll break my heart if you do,’ whimpered Joe. ‘I did what I thought was best, and if you hate me—ah, well! I’ll try and bear it, hard as it will be. But now, come what may, you must listen to me once for all—I’ll not touch you if you don’t like—I’ll not come near you, even; but my mind is made up for one or two things. I have told you over and over again I love you very, very dearly—no man in the world could love a woman more than I do you—impossible! for you are near me night and day. Nay, don’t turn from me, sweet—let me hold your hand, darling!—I’m choking!’

The poor lovesick fool having uttered these words in broken tones, next possessed himself of the girl's fingers, tenderly caressing them for awhile, and so proceeded with his tale, every now and again helped on by the nightingale.

'Now, sweetheart, I'm well-to-do, and every day the mill goes better ; no captain in the wide world could give you such a love as mine ; I've bought those brown ponies, hoping to see you drive them some day as their mistress.'

Lizzie's fingers at this interesting point sensibly tightened on Joe's toil-stained hand, while he, taking the hint, presently possessed himself of the whole arm, and drawing her closer to him, with but slight resistance, now pleaded his cause hard and fast.

'And now I'm going to tell you my resolve. If I talk for a week I cannot tell you more than I have done how dearly I love you—I can but add that if you'll take me, plain Joe Morton, no lady in Alcaston shall be better off'—Lizzie was totting up all the while behind her handkerchief—'and no woman shall boast of a more loving husband. If, on the other hand, you refuse me, my mind is already made up, and I shall sell my mill and go abroad, perhaps over to Brazil or the Indies—I don't care where.'

'Oh, Joe ! and get eaten up by a horrid tiger,' moaned a dove-like voice behind the handkerchief.

'Jug-jug-jug ! True love—true love—sweet, sweet !' squeaked the bird.

'No matter,' said he, valiant in an instant ; 'no matter, there's only mother to grieve for me. I shall go, anyhow, and very likely marry a greasy nigger. Now, Lizzie, you know me ; and you know whether I'm a true man or not,



even if the captain yonder went off scot-free. Joe Gillinghurst could have beaten a score such as he, and I thumped Joe fairly. Well, that's all rubbish, of course ; but, Lizzie, you must decide now, once and for all. I've led a dog's life lately, and I'll lead it no longer ; but one thing I would warn you of. Don't you believe in Captain Welford, my girl ; he's a humbug and a rogue, only seeking your ruin, as he's sought many another. Now, darling Lizzie, which is't to be—do I go or stay ?' and his voice sank to a whisper as he waited for the verdict.

'Oh, Joe !' she half screamed, suddenly and wildly stretching forth her hands, while such a fervour gleamed from her blue orbs as would have upset a stronger-disciplined man than poor soft-hearted Joe. 'Oh, dear, true-hearted old Joe ! can you forgive me ?'

'Forgive you, pet ?' he cried, in proud tremulous tones. 'Aye ! Forgive you ? Why, my dearest, I've nothing to forgive. It was that scoundrel who was in fault, not you !' and he drew her soft, yielding form, untrammelled by stays or bony abominations of any kind, gently to his broad, lion-hearted bosom, patting the fair, wavy brown hair, and oftentimes kissing her smooth, unwrinkled forehead.

It grew darker and darker in the dim recesses of the Lime Walk, and the sweet-toned bird poured forth a jubilant song as though he felt that he had had a large share in Joe's victory.

'Now, my own loved darling, may God's blessing rest on you ! for all my trouble is over, and I may hope to call you my wife soon.'

The girl raised her head—ah ! those brown ponies !—and

lifting her lovely face upwards, her eyes shining with either love or cupidity, swiftly put her soft, clinging arms like beautiful snakes round Joe's honest neck, and while he strained her passionately, and in a sudden fierce gust of love, to his bosom, she panted out shyly and demurely, 'Yes, Joe.'

Well it was that no one save the nightingale was hard by to listen to the rain of kisses that Joe showered down upon the sweet upturned face. An hour later they wandered homewards, Lizzie dreadfully frightened of her father's anger, and Joe all the way reassuring her with kisses.

In the end peace was established, and six months afterwards 'our Lizzie' became Mrs. Joseph Morton, of Littlewash, drove the brown ponies every day into Alcaston, to the envy of all those unfortunate people who hadn't got any, and told her mother that she was very happy. No one saw the captain about the town again for a long time—indeed, it was surmised that he had left to join his regiment abroad on foreign service—and at the time when the letter was sent to Patsy, Tatham's head lad, whom we have deserted for no inconsiderable time, Lizzie had been a mother for some six months, and, to stupid Joe's intense delight, he the father of a big, brown-eyed laddie, which had been solemnly christened Arthur Ardron Morton.





## CHAPTER XII.

### A DELICATE MISSION.

IT was a drizzly, rainy morning, hot, close, and uncomfortable ; just one of those stilly, hazy days when the scent of the flowers and the distant firs hang about in an unaccountable manner, mingled with odours of the moist, rain-drenched earth. A morning when the joyous song of birds—that of a lark poised on quivering wings high overhead, or a thrush perchance perched in clear relief against the dull grey sky on the topmost branch of a cherry-tree—is heard with wonderful and strange distinctness. At any rate, so thought Nat Tatham, as he sat in the little sanctum previously described, ill at ease, fidgety, and solemnly pretending to listen appreciatively to the music of a glorious speckled-throated thrush that was wont to take up his perch morning after morning on the highest branch of Tatham's favourite 'Bergamy' pear-tree.

'I canna mak' it out,' said that worthy, for about the twentieth time, to his rosy bosom helpmate, 'that theer bird never sung so loud in's life•before. What's the meaning of it, old woman—is it a warning, or what not?'

'Drabbit the man ! what do you mean by your warnings

and sich like? God Almighty dost na send warnings i' that fashion by the voice of one of the prettiest of His creatures, and I'd just like to know whatten the warning's about. Get up, dog, do! I declare I canna' sweep t' floor for that dratted dog lying about;' and worthy Mrs. Tatham banged poor old Vic unmercifully with her broom, a sure sign that the good lady was what she called 'worrited' about something or other.

'Coom, old lady, coom now! thee and mey dost na want to quarrel at this time of day; but dunnat bang dog about—I canna' bear to see dumb animals welted for nothing. Coom, give me my pipe, and a kiss, old woman, and we'll forget all the troubles. It's this blarmed letter worries me; I dunnat like it. I'm certain summat's up wi' my hosses, and if there is I should go 'most mad.'

'Why, Nat, my man, whatten the world's to do with yon letter? If there's anything wrong about it, why not break t' seal and put thy mind at rest? There, old man; there's thy pipe—I'll owe you a kiss; and now then what's to do?'

'I wish I dare break it, missis; but you know t' master as well as I do, and he says "No." Well,' he cried, with a weary sigh, "'No" means no with him.'

'Aye, I know it; but hush, ma lad, here he is!' and at that very instant Chance and Tom bustled up to the doorstep, but, like the well-bred dogs they were, waited for an inviting sign to enter.

Directly after Welford's powerful frame filled the doorway, and with a cheery, loud-voiced greeting to his trainer and a courteously doffed hat to his wife, Giovanni's owner entered the room.

‘Now, Tatham,’ were his first kindly words upon seeing the old fellow quietly putting his pipe away, ‘don’t do anything of the kind ; finish your pipe while we chat, and I’ll join you with a cigar. Ah ! there’s the cause of all the mischief, I see,’ he added gaily, pointing to the letter on the mantelshelf. ‘Have you said anything to the boy?’

‘No, sir, not a word,’ said Nat, slowly and distinctly. ‘And, by the laws o’ Moses,’ he added, putting his pipe down again, ‘I’d leifer cut my throat than du it.’

‘My dear Tatham, what nonsense !’ laughed Welford, and he was proceeding to make some other remarks when the rosy partner of his trainer’s joys and sorrows interrupted them with the familiarity of an old and valued servant, saying :

‘Ah, I’m vary glad you’ve come to talk to him, sir. Why, would you believe it o’ th’ stupid gommuck? He’s been saying that the thrush singing there was a sign of some evil to come, instead of its being the Almighty’s voice bidding us all be glad. Eh, deary me, Mr. Welford, my old man has been a weary trouble sin’ that dratted letter coom to light.’

‘Well, Mrs. Tatham,’ said Welford slowly, ‘I’m delighted to think that I have so good a heart in my service. Few men would usurp their employer’s troubles as your husband does mine ; still, I hope we shall find very shortly—indeed, it is more than probable—that we have been making much ado about nothing.’

‘Much ado about nothin’, eh !’ began Nat sturdily. ‘Don’t know about zurpin troubles and all that, but I du know as my hosses ain’t nothin’, and I’m gormed if I’m agoin’ to stand anybody sayin’ as they is, so coom !’ and he absolutely snorted defiance at his master.

‘We’ll put an end to all doubt upon the subject,’ rejoined Welford, ‘by having the boy in at once, then. Mrs. Tatham, oblige me by sending some one round to the stables for Patsy Doyle, if you please.’

‘Ha coorse, thoo knows as I beg your pardon, sir,’ said the trainer, rising from his chair, and putting his pipe carefully in its place, ‘but Mrs. Tatham was just a-tellin’ me when you come in what a devil of a lot o’ tatures there was to peel to-day, and ha coorse she’ll want to do ’em. You be off, old woman ! Meantime, I’ll just run round to my stables and fetch Patsy mysen. Business is business, and it ain’t at no time like suckin’ lollypops when my hosses is consarned.’

‘All right, Nat ! you’re master here—do as you like,’ laughed Welford ; ‘but upon my honour I shall be glad when this simple business is over. Do you know, Mrs. Tatham, I feel as if I had just got through a burglary successfully as it is.’

Touching his hat as he went out, Nat was gone but five minutes, when, to Welford’s intense astonishment, he reappeared on the scene with his arm linked in Doyle’s, his bony fingers clutching the astounded lad’s coat-cuff as though he had been bowled out in a terrible case of felony, while Nat stood in the position of the officer bringing the wretched culprit into the dread presence of the offended majesty of the law.

‘Oh, Tatham, Tatham !’ cried Welford, as soon as he had recovered from a paroxysm of laughter, occasioned by the boy’s look of unconscious horror, and Nat’s visage bubbling over with pompous authority. ‘Never mind, Patsy lad, it’s all right,’ he continued.

‘Right, is it ?’ vociferated Nat ; ‘wrong’s my verdict—damnably wrong—extr’y extrornary wrong ! Now, sir,’ he

roared into the frightened boy's ear, 'sit tha' down, and don't never move a limb !'

'Look here, Tatham, once for all, this must cease—it's positively ridiculous,' said Welford, rising, and in tones of firm authority. 'Now, Patsy, attend to me, and don't you be frightened at anything Mr. Tatham has said, but simply tell me the truth.'

'By the Holy Mother of Jasus ! I'd like to know what I've got to tell about,' said Patsy, recovering himself. 'Is it I've been thaving oats, or poaching, or what is it, at all, at all ? Barrin' kissing the girls, belike—St. Pathrick bless 'em !—it's little I'm knowing this blessed mornin' why I'm dragged in like a thafe—and me a dacent lad.'

'Dacent, you vagabone !' growled Tatham, in his hat, stopped, however, by an imperative sign from Welford before he could utter another syllable.

'Nothing of the s<sup>o</sup>rt, Patsy. So far as I know, I have heard of no fault laid at your door. But now, answer me a question or two. I believe you knew my brother, the captain, when he was here ?'

'I did, sor.'

'Exactly ; and very likely he was kind and generous to you ? Hubert had always a free hand with his money.'

'Aye, and wi' other people's, too,' interrupted Nat sullenly.

'Captin ! Aye, he give me many a shillin', God be good to him !' said the boy, while a look of suddenly aroused keenness spreading over his face did not escape Welford's attention.

'Exactly ; and you were naturally inclined to repay acts of kindness, if it lay in your power ?'

‘Skure, sir, an’ it’s not much a stable lad could do,’ said Patsy stolidly.

‘True, Patsy. An ordinary stable lad—no, not much. In your case, however, it is perhaps a little different, for both Mr. Tatham and I have trusted you very fully in matters connected with the horses.’

‘Tare and ’ouns! So that’s it!’ said Patsy. ‘Well, sor, and what div ye lay at my dure now?’

‘Nothing, my boy. I simply want to ask you whether the captain has ever tried to get information from you about any of the horses.’

‘Inf’mation? No, not much o’ that,’ and a twitch or spasm of pain seemed to flit over the lad’s face. ‘But I’ll tell you what he did do, night afore t’ould horse won Cup at Seaton Park.’

‘Well, Patsy?’

‘Well, sor, sorra a wurrud would I ha’ split on captin; but as I think you know as there’s more in background—— Ten thousand divvles! I don’t half like it now!’

‘Out with it, thou infernal scoundrel, or I’ll dash thy brains out!’ screamed Tatham, jumping up, poker in hand, and with eyes flashing like a falcon’s.

‘Sit down, Tatham!’ said Welford quietly, yet sternly; then putting his hand half-caressingly on the boy’s shoulder, he added, ‘Now, Patsy, lad!’

‘Sorr, oh, sorr!’ cried the boy, whilst tears filled his eyes, ‘I think the captin was dhrunk; but, God forgive him, he wanted me to give Geevanna a pail of water before his race, and offered me fifty pounds to do it.’

‘Saints in heaven! My brother! Oh, Hubert, Hubert!’



and the master turned his face away. 'Well, Patsy,' he said at length, after a long pause, 'and you—what did you say? Of course I know you did not do it, my poor lad.'

'Sorr, savin' your presence, I told the captin, if he came timptin' a poor boy, by the Blessed Vargin I'd dhrove my pitchfork through his ribs. By gorra! I love my horses more than all the fifty pounds in the warruld. An' I've never known a minnit's peace since, for I get wakin' at nights, a-thinkin' captin may get at Geevanna somehow; and sometimes, sor, thought I'd tell Mister Tatham, and then I did not like to crack on the captin after all, for he'd been kinder to me than most people scores o' times;' and at the finish of the lad's little speech, his voice sounded husky, and piped a shrill treble, in lieu of his ordinary somewhat harsh tones.

'Patsy, my boy,' said Welford presently, after a moment's quiet had reigned in the little room, broken only by the loud, thrilling song of the thrush in the 'Bergamy'—'Patsy, all I can say is that you've acted as a thorough gentleman would have done in this unhappy business, and I thank you. You shall not lose, believe me, by your honest integrity. And now for the next matter—poof! how hot it is! I feel, Tatham, for all the world as though I'd been condemned to death, and heard the chapel-bell tolling.'

'A vary fine feeling, too, sir. Wouldst tha' like to know as ar feel? Well, ar feel as if ar was Calcraft and ma hand was holding t' bolt-handle, with the rope round Captain Welford's neck. Ar should pull it, by God!'

Welford knew from experience how useless it was to argue or reason with Tatham; knew that he possessed a nature so bluntly honest, a heart so fearlessly true, that he would have

called King or Kaiser liar to his face had he believed in the assertion, and therefore took little heed of the pointed remark just made by the bluff, gruff and grim old fellow.

Turning again to the lad, he said, pointing to the letter : 'There is a communication for you, Pat. It was brought here the other day by some boy or hanger-on at the Crown. Mr. Tatham and I have some reason to believe that it is from my brother Hubert. Have you any objection to reading it here, and, in the event of anything further being said in it regarding my horses, let me see what it is that my brother desires? You have entire liberty in the matter, mind, and I trust you very fully. Still, having told me so much as you have, I think if Captain Welford desires any further information, it is I who ought to supply it——'

'A letter for me, eh?' cried Patsy, waking up at once. 'Then I'd be obliged to you, sorr, I would indade, if you'll put me up to the contints uv it; for divvle a wurrud can I read but print, and that must be pretty large, like "Lost, stolen, or strayed, a maley heffer," or something in that line o' country.'

'Then you really wish me to read it to you, Patsy, let it come from whom it may?'

'I'd be downright thankful to you, sorr.'

'Very well,' he exclaimed in an undertone. 'I don't half like it, and the bell seems tolling louder than ever, but there is no help for it; either Hubert is a rogue or a fool, and I'll know which it is.' So saying George Welford broke the seal of the letter to his head stable-lad.

It was very short, and ran in this fashion :

‘George Hotel, Alcaston.

‘TO PATRICK DOYLE.

‘I have a matter of the greatest importance to yourself, which I should like to talk over with you. I am staying here for a few days, and until certain business which has brought me down is settled, I do not desire my brother to know of my whereabouts, unless some of the old women in the village take it into their heads to tell him. You need fear nothing as to my *bonâ fides*, and my communication has nothing to do with your favourite horse. Meet me here on Sunday night ; make yourself as presentable as possible, and you will not regret your visit. Send a reply by bearer.

‘Yours faithfully,

‘HUBERT WELFORD, Captain 17th Regt.’

‘Well, Tatham ! There is nothing very dreadful in that after all,’ said Welford, with a sigh of relief. ‘You see, Hubert says very distinctly it has nothing to do with the horses. therefore it may be that he has learnt something to the lad’s advantage.’

‘Larnt some’at to his advantage ; bah, sir ! ar didna think it of tha,’ said Tatham hastily, with a world of quiet sarcasm. ‘Larnt some’at to his advantage—not he ; Muster Hubert Welford ain’t o’ the sort to put himself out for anybody. Wants to larn some’at to his own, ar take it. If he can do the boy any good, why not come up here like a man, and do it?’

The elder brother did not answer, for there was much in the old trainer’s outspoken remarks that coincided with his own inmost convictions. Presently Tatham asked : ‘What dost tha’ intend to do, sir?’

‘Upon my word I hardly know, Tatham,’ he replied.

wearily. 'It seems like setting a trap for Hubert to let Patsy go to him, and yet it would drive me mad to think that my own brother was plotting against me behind my back. What do you advise?'

Fixing his eyes on his master's face, he began in low tones, which gradually increased in intensity: 'Stoats want scrunching when they robs tha' hen-roost; and if a fox stole my Aylesbury ducks, and there worn't no hounds anigh to rout him out of cover, ar'd trap him. Trap this fox, sir! Trap him and scrunch him! Hell's fires! scrunch him to death, ar say!'

'Gently, Tatham, gently; remember this is my own brother.'

'Ar do remember it, sir,' said the trainer sturdily and resolutely—'ar do remember it, and ar remember as he tried to put temptation in that boy's way as many another ud a bit at. Ar do remember it, and ar likewise call to my mind as the grass is barely green o'er Bessie Ransom's grave and her babe's, as had ne'er a name of its own, poor little bairn! Both on 'em taken out of the cold waters of the Swash—both on 'em drooned—mother barely eighteen years old, and t' babe but eighteen days. Drooned wi' never a name, wi' never a hand put out to help 'em, in tha' cold black night. Oh, Muster George! you know whose name that baby oughter borne!' he wailed, with a soft inflection in his voice that made it sound like a woman's. Then suddenly he said, with a fiery burst: 'Trap this fox, sir. Blast him! trap him I say, and scrunch him! Patsy, gi' me my pipe.'

Lighting it, he blew furious wreaths of smoke from his wrinkled pursed-up mouth, while a watery humour filled his

eyes, doubtless owing to the pungent quality of the tobacco.

‘Well, Tatham, I will think of all this,’ said George Welford slowly, and with a pained look upon his fine open face, on which sat honour and candour as though it had been stamped there. ‘I will come down again to-night and tell you my resolve. A sad business, a sad business ! Good-morning, Tatham,’ he added, extending his hand ; ‘good-morning, Patsy.’

‘Good-morning, sor,’ replied the boy, picking up his cap where it had fallen, in his open-eyed astonishment at the old man’s outburst, and preparing to go quietly out.

‘Stop, Patsy,’ said Tatham, as the door closed on Welford’s tall figure. ‘T’ missus has got a rare pork pie, and you know her ale of old. I’ll give thee a bit, lad ; I’ll give thee a bit. ‘Thoo’s a good lad.’

Coming from his master, Patsy thought more of the pork pie and the ale than he would have done of Captain Hubert’s money, and it was the old man’s way of showing his appreciation of the boy’s conduct.

There are very few ‘Patsys’ in racing stables now, or in the world either, for that matter.





## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE LAST STRAW.

THE sunshine of 'baby's' face, the shy, trustful simplicity of the sweet, innocent eyes that looked up from the soft cushion of her lap, had acted like a charm upon Mary Welford, just as the warmth of the sun, kissing the bruised head of a flower, or a fragile stalk upon which a careless heel had been placed, draws the sap again through the tiny cells, and possibly puts new life into the crushed petals.

Mary had lain for a week or more almost unconscious of the legacy of her husband's love which lay nestling close to her fair bosom, and, although Monckton prophesied a steady recovery, he yet hardly liked to own, even to himself, that there was something below the surface and totally apart from the disease which he could not fathom in the subdued, listless state of semi-exhaustion into which it seemed the young mother was fast drifting. All his tonics were apparently thrown away. Champagne, carefully administered, raised her feeble strength for a brief period, but the reaction frightened the good old doctor, for his fair patient's system sank to a lower ebb than ever. Her appetite got worse instead of better, and she frankly told the fussy old fellow

one day that she seldom attempted to eat anything. Chops, jellies, and soups, she said, were an utter nuisance to her, and she felt quite assured that she was better without them.

To say that Monckton was thunderstruck is a bad rendering of the doctor's emotions. He was simply paralyzed, and for a brief second sat staring at Mary with his mouth wide open. His look of utter surprise at her open rebellion was so comical that she laughed right out a little meaningless, feeble laugh, that seemed to jar upon Monckton's ear from its entire absence of any element of mirth. It did him good, however, for it woke him up thoroughly, and, like a flash of lightning in its rapidity, a conviction entered his brain that here was a case where drugs and potions would be found of small account. The first thing that he had to minister to was a 'mind diseased' upon some point or other, the malady he had to tackle being nothing under the head of bodily ailment, and yet one that was simply gnawing at his patient's very heart's core.

No sooner had the doctor arrived at this conclusion than he made up his mind to probe the wound as deep as he could—if possible, to find the root of it, and having found it, do his best to eradicate it; so that, with this purpose firmly seated he desired to be left alone with his patient the next day, excluding even 'the dowager,' as he irreverently called George's mother, and giving special instructions that the conference was not to be interrupted.

Pulse and tongue having been inspected, sundry lums and ha's ejaculated, pinches of snuff taken, and absorbed again amongst the folds of a tremendous bandana and the little man's shirt-frill, he at last came boldly to the front.

‘Now, Mrs. Welford,’ he commenced, ‘you of course ate your fish and had the wine I ordered yesterday?’

‘I drank my champagne, doctor, but I could not get on with the sole. I had a biscuit instead,’ and she smiled a faint, deprecating sort of smile, intended as an apology for not doing precisely as she had been ordered to do.

‘Splendid! You’ll have another biscuit to-day,’ said he savagely, ‘and another to-morrow; and by this time next week I’ll venture to say that we may begin to think about your funeral, my dear lady!’ and he sat twiddling his thumbs, and glaring at her through his spectacles.

‘Oh, Dr. Monckton!’ she wailed feebly, putting up her thin hands, the fingers of which looked absolutely transparent, so white and fragile did they seem. ‘Oh, doctor! how can you say such things? This is absolutely worse than cruel!’

‘No, Mary—beg pardon—tush! I’ve known you since you were a girl, so I’ll call you what I like—it is not cruelty, it is kindness, or will be in the end—at present it is simply the truth. Day after day you eat nothing, don’t even attempt to do so, and I shall not hide from you the fact that day after day you are getting weaker. The end must come, and now I want to know why you want to leave George and your baby behind?—Bless his bonny nut, where is he?—Ah! the rogue, what lovely eyes he has!’ ejaculated the sly old fox as he turned down the sheets and peeped in at baby’s fluffy poll, gently tapping the tiny hand tight clasped in the folds of his mother’s nightdress.

He watched her closely—watched her sweet face, so lovely in its soft, harmonious lines, turned to where the tip of baby’s



downy head lay—watched her rosy mouth smother the boy's silky thatch of hair with loving kisses, and then, as she lay seemingly wearied and sick at heart, great tears gathered slowly under the long silken lashes, and coursed one another swiftly down the thin face, chastely beautiful even in its exceeding look of weary languor.

He said never a word for full five minutes, and when he did speak it was with such a volume of sympathy and soothing quietude in the usually boisterously merry voice, that caused his listener to half wonder whether it could be the doctor who was speaking to her.

'There's some grief, Mary, child. Tell it to me, my poor girl—tell it to me, and I'll warrant we put it right again, George and I. Come, Mary, for the sake of that little, tiny life you have brought into the world.'

'I cannot, doctor,' she cried, while fresh tears succeeded those already moistening the lace of her pillow.

'Try, poor little woman. Come, I'm old enough to be your father.'

'Ah, I wish my father were here,' she sobbed, in a paroxysm of sorrow. 'Doctor, doctor, I want to go home again to my own people!'

'Tell me why,' he said, quietly. 'Come, it is needful that you should, or, at any risk, I must speak to your husband.'

'Oh, doctor! for heaven's sake, no!—not that, for all the world.'

'Then tell me your trouble,' he said, firmly. 'I am certain that you can, and, depend upon it, the simple fact of your broaching the grief, whatever it is, will help to

dissipate it. Come, now, if anything happens to you—and I fear the very worst—I shall hold myself guilty of your death. Out with it, I say, either to myself or the dowager, I care not which; otherwise I must and will speak to your husband.'

'You are bitterly cruel, doctor,' she said at length.

'I should be sorry to think so—to you, at any rate,' he rejoined. 'And presently I hope to congratulate both myself and you upon the result—not of cruelty, but of pertinacity.'

At last the murder came out, the mountain belching forth its mouse in the shape of that frivolous village scandal, of which the reader has heard something, to the effect that she had heard upon excellent and undoubted authority that the rector's daughter, poor consumptive Eveleen Lancaster, was lying a-dying of a love for George Welford, her husband—her own George, she sobbed—a love which she somehow felt sure had been requited to the full on the part of the gentleman concerned.

'And you mean to tell me, Mary Welford,' said Monckton, after listening to her story, 'that you have taken this silly twaddle to heart, and are now trying to commit suicide on the strength of it? I'm 'literally' ashamed of your gullibility, that's all I can say. If ever woman possessed a heart, noble and true in the extreme—a heart incapable of fraud—God knows there's not many of 'em knocking about—you do in George Welford's. If ever there was an honest man, a true gentleman, it is he. He is utterly incapable of deceit—he loves you as a miser loves his—Bosh! I don't know what I'm saying. Why, you are his fetish—a goddess

worshipped on a pinnacle. Gad, I don't wonder at it, either, although you are a little fool. See here !' he cried, his voice ringing with the glorious certainty of his belief, 'I'll stake my existence on George's truth and honour, and all I can say is, God bless you both ! If you doubt him, you'd better doubt the babe by your side, for the heart of the one is not a whit purer than that of the other.'

'Ah ! doctor, you've done me good. I am afraid I have been very silly. My darling baby ! where is he ?' she said excitedly, turning down the coverlet to look into the tiny face.

As she did so his eyes—they were a reproduction of George's, she told herself a thousand times afterwards—looked full into hers, pure as a forest spring, and trustful as a saint's. She was cured from that hour, and drank health and strength from Monckton's good tonics, and, better still, the unpoetical wines, jellies, and chops he ordered her—which were all taken—in conjunction with an hourly perusal of her baby's lovely features. All in due time George and she had their deferred explanation—following the communication made by Monckton himself to her husband—it ending by Mary being happier than ever..

One morning, a month afterwards, upon being told that the sound of the passing bell, heard as it swept by on the summer wind, was the knell which heralded the transition of Eveleen's gentle spirit from earth to happier regions, Mary shed quiet sorrowful tears over the early fate of her fancied rival, whispering at the same time a silent prayer for the spirit winging its way on high. George's wife had since then long changed the monotony of the sick-room for the happier bustle of everyday life again. Had got rid of her lilies, and

boasted of cheeks that blushed in the autumnal sun, ruddy as a ripening peach on a southern wall.

Directly after leaving Tatham and Patsy, Welford had gone straight to his home, in ample time for his early three o'clock dinner. At the Hall old-fashioned notions were kept up, one of them being a dislike to late dinners, save upon very rare occasions. The captain had voted them Goths when he had been staying there, and George retorted that he rather liked being a Goth, and that perhaps if he, Hubert, were to turn out and occupy himself in some healthy pursuit, instead of keeping old Grant up every night till an unconscionable hour, and then turning out the next morning at eleven, after discussing soda and brandy in bed, in lieu of anything more healthfully solid, he might be in a position to appreciate even such an *outré* taste as a liking for an early dinner.

The captain used to shrug his shoulders disdainfully, and gnaw the ends of his moustache, leaving victory with George, if he cared to accept it.

'Back again, darling!' cried sunny-faced Mary, hastening to meet George as he entered the house, and putting up her mouth—a rosy, pouting mouth, with sweet, moist lips—to be kissed. 'But what's the matter with my dear old George? Why, Hubby, 'oo's dot a face like a thunder-cloud.'

'I'm vexed, Mary, love!—sadly vexed, Poppy!' the latter was a pet name of Master George's; 'and I hardly know what to do,' said he, sinking wearily into a low, comfortable chair.

'Then take the Grand Vizier into confidence at once, sir, and you will get advice based upon the soundest principles.'

They had turned into the dining-room, and she was kneeling at George's feet as she spoke, and put her arms lovingly round his broad, sunburnt neck, while at the same time she

drew her husband's storm-clouded face towards her own, nestling her soft pink and white cheek against his weather-tanned and slightly wrinkled face. Then she began patting his curly head with her little hand with an air as though he would find instant comfort and relief from the touch of her fingers.

'Poppy, my pet,' George began, slowly and stupidly, 'suppose you knew a man whom you cared for, and yet whom you fancied was a rogue—what would you do?'

'Read the Bible to him ; never let him find buttons off his shirts ; marry him to a good woman ; get her to cook nice dinners for him ; and ask God to give him a baby like mine.'

George laughed, in spite of the misery that quilted him at heart with sore stripes, at the odd mixture of spiritual and mundane comfort supposed to be administered to an erring sinner, recognising, however, at once, that such a course would hardly apply to Hubert's case.

'Aye, aye, pet ; that's a very lovely course of cure, no doubt. But supposing this man was, say, a brother, one whom you knew was fairly steeped in what men call, prettily, social vices—a man who, having had his fling, yet thirsted for more—a man who you had reason to think was plotting treason against you, against your own kith and kin—how then?'

'George, you are speaking of Hubert?' she queried in a low voice.

'Ha ! what makes you think so, Poppy?'

'I don't think at all ; I feel that you are. Is it not so?'

'Say it is,' said George gloomily ; 'and that I have reason to think he is planning some scheme against me—something by which he makes money and I lose it. What would you do then, Poppy ? I am afraid it is so, and I ask you to advise me.'

‘George, darling, will Hubert come here again?’

‘I don’t know. Why?’

‘Because—because, darling——’ She hesitated, and laid her face upon his shoulder. ‘I must tell you now, I suppose, and yet I have tried not to think of it. Hubert is not nice to me when you are away. He says things to me that I don’t think he should say to his brother’s wife—says he is privileged to kiss me, and does it, too, in a fashion that I don’t like altogether, although I’m very sorry to tell you. George, darling, I cannot meet your brother again—at any rate, alone.’

She rather expected a storm of anger. It was a communication she had long intended to make to her husband, inasmuch as the gallant captain had made advances which were unmistakable in intention, and she was surprised when he said quietly, yet icily :

‘Thank you, Poppy. Let us go in to dinner, darling, and forget all this. Hubert will not come here again now, rest assured. Come along, mother mine,’ he added, more gaily, as the old lady entered the room, ‘or we shall have our mutton cold.’

George kept every trouble most religiously from his mother, and particularly anything in connection with her younger son, who the good soul thought was a model of virtue and propriety. Mary saw the cloud, however, on her husband’s open face, and presently heard him mutter to himself, as he helped her to soup, ‘That settles the matter. It’s the last straw that breaks the camel’s back.’

A moment afterwards he gave orders to a man-servant to take a message to Tatham at the stables, letting him know that his presence was desired at the Hall directly after dinner.

There was naturally every now and then an awkward pause, but presently George said to his wife :

‘You’ll forgive me being away after dinner, love ? I have a matter of the utmost importance to settle with Tatham.’

‘Very well, George ; get back as soon, however, as you can. I rather want a chat with you to-day.’

Directly afterwards he left the room, and the elder woman, looking at Mary gravely for a moment, presently asked, in a voice rendered querulous from anxiety :

‘Is anything the matter, Mary dear ? I thought, do you know, that the boy’s face looked troubled just now.’

‘No, mother,’ said Mary, ‘nothing of any importance. There’s some little bother about those troublesome colts—nothing else.’

She was doubtless forgiven her little fib, for the cloud on the old lady’s face soon cleared away, giving place to a serene look of trust and peace which always seemed to have its throne there. The sands of life were gradually, yet none the less surely, running down, and it was George’s devout hope that, every care being spared his mother in her declining years, she would meet the terrible reaper, when he came, with a smile on her lip and a sense of utter happiness and peacefulness. He thought that, fast drifting as she was, the less her heart was troubled with anxiety or doubt for those very near and dear to her the longer she would be spared to them, while the separation when it did come would be less keenly felt. For this reason, then, the reader will not be surprised if he or she sees little more of George’s mother in the future.



## CHAPTER XIV.

### CLEAN BOWLED !

THE last straw had indeed broken the camel's back. George Welford never so little as by a single question insulted his wife so much as to ask for any particulars of Master Hubert's misdoings, inasmuch as he knew that, to a woman so pure and undefiled of heart, something of grave moment must have occurred for her to take a course so eminently fraught with disunion between her husband and his only brother, as her late communication must of necessity imply. In his presence, Hubert's conduct towards his sister-in-law had been the very acme of polite decorum. Not so much as by a single gesture or chance expression had he ever aroused his brother's jealousy, and, had George been compelled by chance to take a journey to the uttermost ends of the earth, he would have been overjoyed to think that he could have left his young wife in the care of a man whom he trusted as implicitly as he did his younger brother. True, he knew that Hubert's notions of right and wrong were somewhat more lax than his own. True, he knew that he was, to a certain gentlemanly extent, unprincipled ; and poor Bessie Ransom's fate was not altogether a sealed book to him. But towards his own wife—towards Mary ! why, George would



have sooner suspected the grave old vicar, snowy-haired Mr. Lancaster, or good, fussy Dr. Monckton himself, of wrong doing or evil thoughts, as his own brother Hubert, he whom he loved with a generous, confiding affection, and whose very life he had once saved. Thus George reasoned, and said to himself—if one cannot trust one's own brother, the chaplain, or the doctor in the household, whom in the name of fate is one to trust?

Then Tatham came and went, having his orders—such orders being sorely against George's notions of honour—that Patsy was to receive such schooling as Tatham thought proper, and was to meet Hubert at the George at the appointed time.

A hundred times was the elder brother tempted to withdraw them. He said to himself that the act of setting a trap to catch Hubert was a detestable one, unworthy of himself or Mary's cause; but then, how was he to have sufficient excuse without opening up the nature of the last straw—and that he was determined not to do—for forbidding Hubert's future admission to his home? That he must forbid it, for Mary's sake, was clear; and perhaps, after all, the fact that Hubert was bowled out in an attempt to suborn his head lad, was better than to take the chance of an open rupture on the score of possible contingencies arising from the captain's unforbidden residence at the Hall.

'A great pity,' said George musingly, 'because the old roof-tree was a place to which the captain had always resorted in the hunting and shooting season, with the same regularity that a Bethnal Green pigeon finds its way back to its owner's dormer.'

Thus the trap was laid, and Tatham went his own way rejoicing on the score that the fox who was plotting against 'his hosses' was about to be 'scrunched.'

The George was one of those delightful rambling old inns, full of quaintly-built rooms, each one of which contained as much timber in the massive joists crossing the ceiling as would build a modern house, and only to be found in such an old-time, out-of-the-way neighbourhood as Alcaston. One could imagine, long before the coaching or railway era, that some of Cromwell's Ironsides or Prince Rupert's fiery cavalry had stabled their horses in the long line of loose boxes at the back of the tall gabled roof-tree. Certain it is that it had once been an important posting-house, and tales were yet told how Bill Gregory, the smart, scarlet-coated Highflyer guard, had shot dead in his saddle a very scourge of the road, one Captain Tiplady, and brought back the dead body to the George doors, neatly stowed away in the boot, as a proof of his prowess. That, however, was in the old cut-and-thrust, swashbucklering, three-bottle days, and since then civilization had marched on with mighty strides, the rail had been brought close to the town, and people bought their brandy and paid for it like decent citizens, instead of smuggling it across country in covered carts from the nearest seaport, when it was known that the *Saucy Kitty* or *Daring Sally* had run a cargo of kegs successfully—that, too, under the very noses of the preventive-men.

The coffee-room was an eminently respectable apartment, warm, cosy, and dim, with a little corner curtained and shut off from the vulgar gaze, in which an eminently respectable creature, grown old in the service of the George's coffee-

room customers, seemed to be leading a peaceful existence from morning to night, occupied in nothing more trying to the constitution than polishing tumblers to the last degree of brilliancy, and rubbing his hands softly one over the other.

The George's 'William' was an extraordinary man in many matters. He was one of those fat, pasty-faced men whose flesh seems to fit into folds and creases. When he smiled—a great rarity, and only indulged in as a luxury—his broad, ample features broke up into a variety of strange curves and deeply indented lines, the depth of the fatty creases denoting the quality of the joke. The cause of mirth being over, the folds and creases seemed to slip naturally into their places again, leaving his face as expressionless as the surface of a still pool, after the ripples and waves consequent upon a slight disturbance of the surface had died a natural death. No one ever saw William Chapman wear boots; always shoes, ample and easy, tied with a broad ribbon. No one ever saw him missing from his place at morning service; and no one ever heard him use a more tremendous word, upon any amount of provocation, than 'Gor-a'mighty!' or when speaking of the French, with whom he had an idea we ought to be incessantly at war, he'd say, 'Dord barn the beggars; I wish they'd got the Duke arter 'em!' Next to his Maker, William held the name of Arthur Wellesley in highest adoration, and thought such a man had never lived as he in this world. He hated women as he hated the devil himself. No amount of argument could convince him that a really good woman, bar his own mother, had ever existed. He called them all—maids, wives, and mothers—'a pack of rumpish hoydens.' He absolutely

fainted once, when a smart London barmaid, impelled thereunto by a big wager in gloves, made with a raffish young man 'on the road,' to the effect that she did not kiss him, won in a walk. When he recovered again he straightway deluged the girl with half a bucket of dish-washings. There were only two things on the face of the earth that he cared a button about, the one being the coffee-room cat—a sleek, fat-jowled tabby, that always seemed to be sitting in the same place to an inch on the swing-doors that divided his special sanctum from the public room—the other, racehorses. Next to the great Duke, Tatham, perhaps, occupied the highest niche in William's esteem. More than that, the two were fast friends and cronies, and not unfrequently Tatham had dropped the other a quiet hint as to something that was likely to transpire, which William had taken instant advantage of, very much to the benefit of the credit side of his modest banking account. Very probably the two when they met hardly exchanged a dozen words. Just before Kingfisher won at Burton, Tatham had dropped in for a glass of the George's ale, and William had asked him quietly, as he, the sole occupant, drank it in the coffee-room, if he was well. 'Yes,' said Tatham in reply, slowly smoothing his chin with the palm of his hand, and looking at worthy William with a twinkling eye, screwed up miraculously in the centre of a very forest of wrinkles covering his forehead. 'Yes, ar'm well; more than well, ar'm tremenjous well.' Then came a long pause, and he presently added, in an undertone, 'and so is my hoss.'

'Ah!' said William, folding his plump hands, and heaving a deep sigh. 'What a'veinly blessin' it is when we preserves our 'elths!'

‘Aye,’ added Tatham slyly, ‘and when we’ve got nought to rumple our feelings in the shape of a lot of women, eh, Mr. Chapman?’

‘Dord barn the beggars, Mr. Tatham, don’t mention ’em ; a parcel of rumpish—Coming, sir, coming. Good-morning, Mr. Tatham ; glad as you’re well. Coming, sir ! Gora’mighty, what a noise the man’s a-making !’

‘Mornin’,” said Tatham, putting his hard-brimmed hat firmly on his head, and finishing his ale. Not a syllable more was said about horses on either side, but William had £5 on Kingfisher at five to one for all that, and of course won his money.

The result was that crusty old Tatham liked William the Reticent more than he, perhaps, cared to admit. As for William, he simply idolized Tatham, and the more money he made out of his quiet hints the more he loved him.

Thus Tatham, as sure as fate, or the certainty of death, anent William’s silence, had taken him into his confidence, by telling him of the projected meeting. That worthy, appreciating to the full Tatham’s indignant anger at the captain’s treachery, promised to aid, heart and soul, in the process of bowling him out ; so that when the gallant soldier swaggered into the coffee-room upon the eventful evening, William was entirely equal to the emergency of meeting him, and knew how to play his cards to a nicety.

‘Good-evenin’, capting ! Most exstronary fine weather we’re ’avin’. What can I get you ?’

‘Well, I hardly know, William,’ drawled Hubert. ‘I’m a devil of a number of pegs too low to-night. Can’t think what the doose is up with me,’ he added *sotto voce*.

Brandy? No. I drank brandy infernally last night. I was as drunk as a fly, I know. Here, William, get me a bottle of fiz—good dry wine, mind; none of your sweet muck for me—and a tumbler.’

‘Good judge, captin’. Nothing beats a dry wine. Women, Dord barn ’em, likes it sweet; but you, I’ll go bail, know better.’

‘Oh, I don’t know; I’ve known a few women in my time who could take it on as dry as you like to a pretty fair tune. But go and get me my fiz, old fellow; I’m parchéd with thirst. Curse the women! say I.’

‘Amen, captin’. If there is a hinferral thing in this world, to my mind, it is a woman. Root of all evil—root of all misery and sin, and backbiting and poor people having big families, which they gets starved like rats. Beggin’ your pardon for keeping you waitin’. Will you have Heidsieck or Clicquot?’

‘Don’t care a button, either will do; but do, for heaven’s sake, look sharp—my throat feels as if it was the crater of Vesuvius. And, hi! d’ye hear? just ask if anyone has been here for me, will you? A big tumbler, mind—I hate your cursed little glasses.’

The wine creamed up over the edge of the old-fashioned glass, and, filling slowly until he had a full tumbler, the captain finished it at one pull, putting his glass down again with a sigh of satisfaction.

‘Hum! Heidsieck, eh?’ said he, turning the bottle slowly round. ‘Very fair tippie, too. Oh! by-the-bye, William,’ he exclaimed in raised tones, seeing that the man had vanished into his own snugery, ‘has anyone been?’

‘No, sir, there ain’t,’ answered William, emerging from his shell. ‘But—I know as you’ll forgive me for the liberty—don’t you, think as it’s a bad spec to arst any young person to meet you at the Crown coffee-room? Why, lor’ bless you! that sweet creature in the bar would faint at the sight o’ another petticoat, so wirtuous would she feel, you know, in public; but if you held out your arms on the quiet, slap into ’em she’d come like one o’clock. That’s women, that is!’

‘Very likely. I quite agree with you in the main. But who, may I ask, told you that any “young person,” as you put it, was coming to visit me here?’

‘Well, I don’t know as anyone did, but I thought—or, leastways, I might ha’ thought—as it was a haffair o’ gallantry, as the papers say, not knowing as you knew many people in the village.’

‘Take my advice, my man, and don’t think. It’s a devilish bad habit! Leads you into no end of trouble. In this case, for instance. Instead of its being any ‘young person’—fill that tumbler for me, and give me a light. Thanks, very much. I must get some more of these cigars. Ha! just so. Well, now, instead of its being any “young person,” which, in other words, means a young woman—an abomination in your eyes, I know, because you are too devilish old and withered up to be in a position to appreciate the dainty darlings—Damn the cigar, it’s burning sideways! Give me another light, will you, you miserable old misanthrope! Well, it just happens that it’s a young man, or a boy rather. Patsy Doyle is coming here; I dare say you know him—at my brother’s stables. I’ve providentially learnt

something to his advantage, and he's coming here to-night so that I may tell him of it.'

'There, now, fancy that! Always thought you was a good sort, captin'—and you've come down to do Patsy a good turn? You're a gentleman, sir; and I'll always say it, let people talk as they like.'

'What, do the people talk, then, William—and about me?'

'Well, you see, sir,' he said apologetically, 'people will talk; and they says—I'm sure a-beggin' your pardon—as you as good as snuffed out Bessie Ransom. Rubbish! says I. Did Captain Welford shove her into the Swash? Not he; she jumped in. How could he ha' murdered her, then? Besides, sarve her right, says I. What do you think women 'ud care for us if we was in a hinterestin' situation?'

'Certainly not, William; I think you judge the case very fairly. Now, then, isn't there a private room of some kind where I can chat with this lad without interruption?'

'Certingly there is, captin'. Come this way. Ha! here is the boy.'

At the words Hubert turned and went to meet Doyle, while William directly afterwards ushered them into a little private snuggerly, which was only used upon certain nights by the members of a famous whist club.

'Half a minute, William!' cried Welford, as that worthy was about to close the door. 'Now, Patsy, what'll you have?'

'Well, what's good?' asked the lad, with a half-impudent grin.

'Please yourself. Have what you like.'

'Rum and milk, then, captin.'

William, standing at the door, smiled discreetly at the



boy's strange choice of refreshment, while the captain laughed long and heartily.

'Rum and milk, Pat? Here, let me order. Another bottle, William—dry, you know; two large tumblers. Have a cigar, Pat?'

'Thank yer very kindly, captin, I'll not demane myself by refusing;' and the boy took one of the captain's high-flavoured cabanas, putting it half down his throat, and covering it with saliva before lighting it, a process which, in his opinion, was of the greatest utility in the matter of getting it to burn properly.

The champagne was uncorked, the tumblers were both filled, and then William retired, closing the door softly behind him, leaving the two alone.

'Good health, Patsy,' began Captain Hubert Welford, of her Majesty's gallant 17th. 'Good health, my lad.'

'Same to yez, captin, and many of em,' responded Patsy, tipping half the contents of the tumbler down his throat, a process which made his eyes wink and glisten like stars on a frosty night.

'How do you like champagne, eh?' cried the captain, eyeing the lad critically, and blowing a long thin cloud of smoke from his lips ceilingwards.

'Barrin' whisky, I should be saying it was moighty fine stuff intirely; a thrifle like ginger beer, with a dash o' Epsom salts and brandy in it;' and Patsy screwed one eye up, elevating his glass, and watching the bubbles in the generous liquid chasing one another to the surface.

'Ah, well; now, my lad, just attend to me. You're made for better things than hawking dung about, and

rubbing down horses, Patsy. As to your mother, now ; how is she ?'

' Well, the last thing as I heard from her was that she was a grate sufferer intirely wid the rheumatiz in her poor ould bones. But, captin, darlin', what the divil at all at all has my mother got to do with the likes of yez, a rale gintleman, bred and born on your own blessed ground ?'

' Aye, Pat, a gentleman, but a poor sorry devil, without a brass bodle to bless myself with at present ; although I see my way, with your help, to riches for us both.'

' Yer sowl ye do ; then ye're a wonderful man, captin.'

' Now see, Patsy,' cried the captain, rising suddenly from his chair in a sudden fit of excitement ; ' what do you think of going back to old Ireland and the mother ? back again among the purple mountains and the heather-clad hills ? back again among the boys, in the glorious old land where you can hear the grouse crow at daybreak, and see the trout and salmon lying ? back again, you with a thousand pounds in your pocket—money enough to buy a farm and stock it, be your own master, make the old woman happy for life, and marry some pretty colleen ? Gad ! Patsy, my lad, they'll come round you like flies round a sugar cask, and you may end your days in the dear old land—the land of green hills, fresh pure air, and brawling streams. Now, then, say which is best, my lad, that, or your stable life here ?' and he stopped and faced the lad, eagerly watching his features, and scanning every look, as though he would read the boy's very soul.

Patsy sat with his mouth wide opcn, literally staggered by the man's sudden fit of volubility, so utterly unlike his usual listless, lazy indolence.

‘Come, Pat,’ said the captain at length, ‘what do you think of it?’

‘Think of it, begorra! I’d hev all my fingers chopped off one by one if I could make shure of such good fortune.’

‘Well, you can, my lad,’ said the captain eagerly, inclining his head towards the boy. ‘Here, drink, man, drink, and pledge your luck and my own.’

‘And how, captin?’

‘I’ll tell you—but recollect, by the heaven above us, if you breathe a syllable of this to one living soul I’ll reach you, if I go into the very jaws of hell to do it; and when I reach you, come what may, you die! Now, listen. I cannot help it if you are ass enough, fool enough to refuse—please yourself about that; but, if you consent, remember I pledge you my sacred word of honour to give you, Patsy Doyle, a thousand pounds—a thousand pounds, boy!—remember old Ireland and the mother. But first swear to keep my secret—swear upon your hopes of heaven, and your mother’s soul! Now, will you be secret as the grave?’

‘Yis, captin, darlin’! Yis, I’ll—I’ll—never tell a sowl!’

‘Enough. At this moment I am a beggared man; my brother—curse his parsimony!—won’t give me a penny: but I can see my way to a little fortune, if I can stop that infernal horse of his winning the handicap. He will win, I know, if all goes right; if he does not, the mare will to a certainty. Blake’s people are sure to run her right through, and I can win a raker by laying the horse and backing the mare.’

‘Ah! but, captin, darlin’, yez said in your letter it was nothin’ agin the ould hoss,’ cried the boy, with a world of genuine sorrowful reproach in his tones.

‘Peace, you fool ! Drink your wine, and do as I tell you for this once. For this once only, mind—and your fortune’s made.’

‘An’ what do you want me to do, sir?’

‘Well, first I pledge you, Patsy, on my sacred hopes of salvation, that this won’t hurt the horse—it is a simple opiate in powder, which I want you to give him in his last bucket of water before running. As God’s my judge, he’ll be all right again two days afterwards, and you can win as many races as you like with him. Now, will you give it to him?’

‘No!’ thundered Tatham, at that very instant bursting into the room, followed by the elder brother. ‘No, a million times no! thou dirty spawn! Ah! would you? Look out for thyself, Patsy, lad; the dog wants to bite.’

The warning came too late—with a bound like that of a famished tiger the baffled man sprang across the room, and struck the poor lad a terrible blow full in the face with his stick, inflicting a cruel gash clean across the temples. Bleeding and stunned, the boy stretched his arms out helplessly and feebly, tottering with the effects of the fearful stroke administered by the vengeful man’s nervous arm. Tatham sprang towards him, only just in time, and caught him in his arms, as his almost lifeless body, swaying to and fro in his deadly faintness, was in the act of falling prone across the table.

‘Thou deadly viper!’ cried honest, brave-hearted Tatham, as he laid the lad gently down upon a sofa out of the reach of any fresh attack, his voice ringing like a clarion heard in battle. ‘Thou dirty hound! Come and try that on wi’ me now, my lad, and si’thee, old as I am, I’ll fell thee.’

‘So this is a trap, eh?’ cried Hubert at length, turning fiercely upon his brother. ‘A trap, eh, Master George, set to catch me?’

‘Yes!’ said George Welford, slowly and deliberately, looking him full in the face, with eyes that flashed ominously, like the deadly glitter of a steel blade in bright light. ‘Yes, this is a trap set expressly to catch a fox—a cruel, despicable, worthless fox. And I advise you, fox, to get to earth as quickly as you can, out of my sight, or by the heaven above us both I’ll give you into custody for that dastard’s blow! Go, and never let me see your face again—ingrate cur, go! Never let me catch you near my house or lands again, or my men shall flog you into the town like a thief.’

In another instant George had swept by the baffled schemer, with the step and mien of a king; and the next second was kneeling by the boy’s side, chafing his hands, while Tatham bathed his face with water.

‘An ugly cut, sir!’ said the old man at length, neither of the men taking the slightest notice of the captain at the other end of the room.

‘A very ugly cut, Tatham! We’d better get Monckton at once, and the poor lad safe home.’

Both men turned swiftly round as they heard a slight noise made by the door closing softly, and found that they were alone with the wounded lad.

The gallant captain had vanished.





## CHAPTER XV.

### THE EVE OF THE BIG RACE.

DR. MONCKTON made light of the wound, ugly and gaping as it looked at first sight, and wretchedly pallid and miserable as was the boy's appearance at the outset. It was a trifle, he said—would be well in a week ; and then he strapped it up swiftly and skilfully, leaving strict directions, however, that the patient was to be kept quiet for a day or two, and not have grog or beer, both of which he suggested—to Tatham's intense annoyance—that the trainer was in the habit of treating his boys to liberally ; or, in fact, any other stimulating diet, solid or liquid, likely to raise inflammatory symptoms. The doctor was a wise man at times, when occasion called for the exercise of wisdom, and George Welford's air of earnest entreaty when he asked him to keep the matter of the *fracas* in the coffee-room as quiet as possible, was so clear and unmistakable, that for once Monckton had put a padlock upon his tongue. All that the Alcaston gossips got, therefore, in reply to their constant questionings as to what was up at the Hall stables, was a reply to the effect that one of the lads had had a tumble from the straw-loft, and hurt himself on the head. 'No ; nothing more serious, 'pon honour,' said Monckton ; 'and the boy would be well in a week unless erysipelas set in.'

As for Hubert, he had never been seen in the town since. It was probable that he had taken George's stern advice to heart, and gone to earth somewhere or other. The elder brother most religiously hoped he had, and that it might be a period of unknown length before his face was ever again seen in the neighbourhood. The only other human being who knew anything of the meeting or its consequences was the George's William. Of him, Tatham said that he would be as dumb as his dead grandmother buried forty years ago; and as within a week Patsy was 'up' on his old favourite again, and riding him long and strong gallops over the training-grounds without fear of further interruption, the savage assault and its batch of unsavoury reminiscences were at last buried in the past and forgotten, to all save Welford himself, and Tatham, a man who never forgot.

And so the radiance of the sunlit summer-tide had sobered down into the greys and browns of autumn. The trees in the orchards had been robbed of their wealth of ruddy-cheeked apples, the waggons had gone home creaking and groaning under golden loads from teeming harvest-fields. From upland ridges and the sweeping expanse of hill and dale bordering the deep waters of the Swash an observant eye might have noted a puff of white smoke at odd times, followed by a faintly heard far-off report, marking where the gunner had had his shot at the covey of little brown birds so lately basking amid the safe security of fields of golden ears. The man at the next moment, perhaps, was occupied in shading his eyes from the sunlight, and marking to what distant point of safety the survivors had winged their startled way.

Amongst other events, the Littleton Autumn Meeting was on the eve of being held—a meeting which, year after year, excited no end of interest amongst Welford's tenant-farmers and personal friends, from the fact that 't' master always ran some'at in t' big handicap,' and that 'some'at' invariably ran straight as a die, whether it won or not. The consequence was that as the time drew round year after year for the race-meeting, the coffee-room at the George was always fuller of company than at any other period, the conversation being of one quality, and having but one head, that being, in the first place, What was Tatham going to run? in the second, What chance had his horse got?

Saturday night was a great meeting, a gathering of the horsey clans of Alcaston from the one extremity of the town to the other. Occasionally Tatham would pop in and order his one modest glass of grog, 'Rum warm, with two lumps o' sugar, William!' and would sit as utterly oblivious of the multitude of subtle hints and sly suggestions that he 'might, as an old friend,' expose a bit of his hand, as the statue of James I., of blessed memory, erected in the market-place. He thought not, did Tatham—very much so. Thus no amount of pumping got a solitary word from him, and he would sit quietly smoking, sucking at his long churchwarden with slow, solemn puffs, and making a little chirping sound with his lips now and again. His whole air was so mute-like, that a stranger would have thought, with the conversation around entirely based upon the next week's meeting, and the chances of one or two horses engaged in the big race, that Tatham didn't know a racehorse from a Spanish mule, and cared as much for racing as King Solomon would have done



for an hour or two at Bill Tupper's, in the Waterloo Road, watching dogs kill rats for pounds.

The meeting commenced on Tuesday, the following day being that appointed for the big race, and Tatham had gone on with his horses to Littleton—only a matter of some twelve miles from his own training-grounds—on the Monday. On the preceding Saturday, according to his usual custom, he had smoked a pipe at the George, after the horses had been comfortably bedded up for the night, accompanied by Mr. Samuel Ludlow, a dapper, sharp-featured young man, with a face sadly marred by smallpox, and boasting of two deep-set, twinkling eyes, which sparkled in his skull like an angry ferret's. This latter gentleman was the jockey engaged to ride the old horse in the handicap; fairly straight in his profession, at any rate of late years, but with a suspicion of a 'cross' or two in the earlier portion of his career, which assuredly did not increase his number of retainers. With Tatham, however, he never so much as dreamt of treachery, probably from the fact that Sam knew the old man's keen eye would be watching him, and him and his horse alone, from start to finish in a race. For yet another reason: that he was honestly desirous of wiping out the stain attached to his name from anything previously done in the Armstrong line of country. For yet another: that winning in Welford's colours always meant a handsome and generous present afterwards; and last of all, that as it was known that the horses under Tatham's charge ran right out, trying every yard of the way, it afforded Master Sam an excellent opportunity, in donning such an owner's cap and jacket, of regaining his lost popularity.

No sooner had Tatham and Sam taken their seats—the old man having given his usual reserved salutation of ‘Evenin’, gentlemen,’ than a general hush went round the coffee-room, and each man nudged and winked mysteriously at his neighbour, as who should say, ‘Now we shall get at the pea. Presently William brought the rum warm, and the trainer lit his pipe, Master Ludlow taking a little very weak cold gin wherewith to moisten his lips during the consumption of a very mild-looking cigar. Then the chat went at full swing again, while a burly, goodnatured-looking man at Sam’s elbow, Jimmy Woodman, the town saddler, who looked as though he had an everlasting twinkle in his eyes, was making strenuous efforts to get Sam into conversation upon any subject under the sun, from the beauties of tropical vegetation to pig-fattening, so long as he thought a chance might crop up presently where he, Jimmy, might ask the other a question.

‘Sam,’ said Tatham, looking straight before him into the clouds of smoke, ‘ha’ coorse thoo’lt hold thy tongue.’

‘Aye,’ replied Sam stolidly. ‘And so they palms grows forty feet high, eh, sir?’ he chimed in, turning to Woodman afresh.

‘More than that,’ said Woodman; ‘but come, your glass is empty. Allow me.’

‘Daren’t do it, sir,’ said Sam, with a comical look of alarm. ‘I suffer with enlarged tumerus and bronchial articulations of the liver—fearful complaint. One glass cherishes the natural juices, two’s pison. If I was to accept your ’orspitable invitation I should be utturly unfit for my occypation of selling tapes and braces in the mornin’, I do assure you.’

‘Tapes and braces, eh !’ chuckled Woodman. ‘Tapes and braces ! Ah ! sly dog, sly dog ! Leather’s more in your line I should say, now ; but, lor’ ! if so be as it is tapes and braces, bless you, Jimmy Woodman’s mum, sir, mum as a maggot.’

Directly afterwards Tatham rose to go, and as he passed the saddler, leaned over the table and whispered in his ear : ‘Thoo’s backed my old hoss?’

‘Aye,’ replied Woodman, shutting one eye and looking the old man full in the face with the other.

‘Thowt so—ar did, by gum ! Well, it serves tha’ reet, Jimmy—it serves tha’ reet.’ And without another word he made straight for the door. Just as he was pushing his way through the knot of half a dozen excited folks standing there, some one tapped him on the shoulder. It was a straight-limbed, stalwart young giant of our acquaintance with a handsome open face and sparkling eye, and a skin as fine and clear as a woman’s—no other than our old friend, Joe Morton, of Littlewash.

‘Half a second, Mr. Tatham, please,’ said Joe, as he drew the old fellow aside. ‘Now then, I’m going to drive over to Littleton to-morrow—what shall I do?’

‘What shalt do !—why drive back agen, lad, when thoo’s had tha’ belly full.’

‘Aye, but you know what I mean, Tatham,’ laughed Joe. ‘Come, now, am I to have a “tenner” on Geevanna?’

‘Thoo’s not backed him, then?’

‘No,’ began Joe—‘I waited to see——’

‘Si’ thee, Joe, lad,’ whispers Tatham, catching him by the buttonhole—‘ar allus thowt thoo was a fule, and now a’rm sartain on it.’

And this time he really was gone, with Mr. Samuel Ludlow, travelling merchant in tapes and braces, close to his heels.

The next day the horses were quietly vanned through the town, Patsy and Samuel Ludlow in attendance upon the big brown, while the trainer's son, 'Young Bob,' as he was invariably called, looked after the occupant of the second horse van, it being no other than the redoubtable colt out of Grasshopper, who was to run on the opening day in a five-furlong race. The old man himself rode his sturdy grey cob at the head of the *cortège*.

Every man, woman, and child in the little village came flocking to the doors of their domiciles as soon as the rattle of the vans was heard in the quiet street, screaming a welcome and good wishes to the clean, prim-cut old fellow riding at the head of his charges. Monckton himself, who was giving final instructions to young Burrows before starting on his round of daily visits, left off preaching, to the wonder of the sucking Æsculapius, and rushed hatless to the door. He began by shouting cheerily to Tatham, and winding up with a rattling view-hallo as the grey cob trotted by, to Tatham's intense disgust, and to the silent horror and wonder of the Misses Tabitha and Elsie Noot, who kept a trim and intensely respectable circulating library next door to the doctor's establishment. Even saddened, gin-drinking Jabez Ardron, with his hypocritical partner at his elbow—happily free, for a time, from neuralgia or other evils—came to the door of the shop, while Lottie's sweet face peeped from an upstairs window. The worthy grocer waved a half-sulky adieu to Tatham as the cavalcade swept by, with all the tag, rag, and bobtail of the village shouting and cheering

the old man, with his calm, impassive face. He took little notice of the popular ovation, and save for an occasional touch of his hat with raised fore-finger to the better class of the inhabitants of Alcaston, when he happened to meet any of them jogging into the little town to transact business, one might have thought that the old man was inanimate and careless of all that was passing.

Thus they trotted quietly along until Littleton was reached, all agog with importance upon the coming race-meeting. Look where one would, the windows—funny little bow-windows they were, too, most of them, allied to shop-doors where one had to drop, as it were, down two or three stairs before one got into the shop itself, studiously clean and sweet, with a neatly sanded floor—were full of good things. They were blocked up, in fact, with noble hams, pinky and white of outer rind, great rounds of beef and piled-up mountains of brisket, and such pork-pies, flaky, yet substantial of crust, full of savoury appetizing jelly, which filled up every crink and cranny. Then each pie was solid of its inner strata of the flesh of tender porkers, with just that tender blending of salt and pepper and sage as only Yorkshire pork-pie makers, in all this right little, tight little island, can possibly produce. Then these were flanked with hecatombs of crisp baked loaves, great piles of sweet yellow butter, dishes full of mince-pies and cheesecakes, and wonderful apple-turnovers, one of which looked enough for a Brobdingnagian soldier's dinner; and such scores of cheeses, ripe and ruddy, and pans of buttermilk and dishes of peas fried in dripping or oil until they were crisp and golden, that altogether it looked as if the little town was victualled as for

a siege. And what a snug, highly respectable town it was! One broad street ran right through it from the railway station—a street as clean and sweet as a fresh-plucked apple, and paved with round-faced cobbly stones. One came to the market-place—a wide, open square with a beautiful old stone cross in its centre, a pure and ancient specimen of architecture, where in the shade the farmers' wives sat with their eggs and butter on market-days. Over this square the grandly-massive Norman tower of St. Mary's cast its lengthy shadow. It was a gloriously beautiful old tower, bearing on its south flank the marks of some of stern old Cromwell's rain of cruel shot and shell, as he had poured in his fire upon the devoted little hamlet from the high sweep of Dene's Hill, facing the racecourse. Opposite the market-cross were the Lamb and the Elephant, the two best inns in the town, the former being the one at which Tatham always stabled his horses, and here a group of a dozen or so of clean-shaven, pinky-gilled, healthy-looking yeomen had gathered round the wide entrance to the stables, on the lookout for Tatham, whose anticipated advent had been already buzzed about from one end of the town to the other. Groups of farmers, sturdy and strong of muscle and sinew, hardy, beef-fed-looking men, with solid legs encased in hard-wearing cords and leather gaiters, finished off with laced-up boots, an inch thick of sole, were dotted here and there up the quiet street. Now and again one came across an influx of strangers, pale of face, and with restless sunken eye, denoting the sporting element of some far-off town. Next, as a matter of course, one met with the usual scattered detachment of greasy, sweat-grimed Jews, heavy of lip and

large of nasal protuberance, with faces that looked as though they were guiltless of the impeachment of contact with soap and water for months past. One always finds these dirty gentry where racing is going on, and they are men whose chief business seems to consist in looking over other men's shoulders, and prying and peeping like hungry ferrets when they smell carrion.

Presently, as the horse-vans creaked and jolted over the rough-paved street, on the way to the Lamb stables, the various groups broke up and followed, until Tatham had an army of followers at his heels, a matter which more sorely angered the good old fellow than one could conceive. At the door of the Elephant stood four or five individuals, prominent amongst them a tall, burly man, with ample red whiskers and redder face, who saluted Tatham with a cheery shout as soon as the old fellow rode up. This was Tom Blake, the trainer of Frenzy, a real good mare, and the second favourite in the big race, Welford's brown holding the pride of place, although the mare ran him very closely. Close at Blake's elbow was one of the ubiquitous children of Israel—a fat, shiny sort of fellow, with greasy black hair, a sallow face, and boasting a big, flash-looking ring on his little finger. Under the pretence of eagerly scanning his own book, he was doing his very best to get a peep at one or other of the open volumes of the party engaged in comparing, and cocking his ears with all the ardour of his greasy soul.

‘Good-morning, Nat!’ shouted Blake heartily. ‘Have you brought the winner with you?’

‘Well, a’rm not sartain, Tom. There’s a main lot runnin’,

this time. If any on you's got a book, I'd like to back one. How much Earwigger there?' and he pointed full at the sneaking Jew as he rode by.

The crowd caught the old man's hint in an instant, and a roar of laughter went up from the Yorkshiremen standing round, when they saw Blake turn swiftly round, and with an indignant push send the crafty vagabond clean through the wide-open door sprawling on his back in the sanded entry.

'You've been at my elbow all the morning, hang you!' said Blake. 'I've got no pork-chops about my clothes. Lie there, you sweep!'

Tatham, chuckling, got on as quickly as he could with his charges to the Lamb, particularly as he heard the old horse, excited, perhaps, a little with the noise of the crowd, give vent to a loud whinney of impatience at being boxed up so long.

'Now, mey lads,' he cried, 'mak' way there! coom, mak' way there! Steady coomin' round t' post, Jack!' he cried to the leading postillion. 'Dal' it all, man, get out o' way!' and shouting and riding full tilt at a grimy-faced cobbler, who had left his stall in the market-place to take care of himself, he forced his grey cob through the ranks of the offenders until he had secured a passage for the vans.

Once in the yard the hangers-on tried to follow, but the old chap had the gates rattled to in no time. Then he blew his nose with a report like a pistol, and mopped his perspiring face. Ten minutes later the horses were safe in their boxes, and after Nat had paid them a careful visit of inspection, and passed his hand anxiously over their sinewy



legs and pasterns, he heaved a deep sigh of relief, and, leaving them in Patsy's charge, under strict injunctions that not a soul was to come into the stable, he and Mr. Samuel Ludlow went straight to the great roomy coffee-room to refresh themselves with a glass of the Lamb's beady ale, after the worries and anxieties of their journey. There we will leave them for a time, with hopes for their success the next day.





## CHAPTER XVI.

### TATHAM TRIUMPHANT.

LITTLETON woke up the next morning to find itself for the time being famous. It was the beginning of a joyous autumnal day. One of those lovely crisp mornings, with just a symptom of frost in the air, and an atmosphere half warmed by a brilliant sun, making the dewdrops, dripping a rain of pearly offerings from the high hawthorn hedges, look not so much like pearls as diamonds of the purest water. One of those mornings when the cock pheasants seem to rise with a louder whirr of their powerful pinions than of yore ; when the subtle odours left by the cubs rollicking among the dew-laden fern and bracken send the young hounds nigh mad with excitement as soon as the veteran huntsman cheers them into cover with one wave of his hand and a single shout of ' Eleu in, pups ! ' ' Eleu in, my darlings ! ' ' Yoicks over ! ' One of those mornings when five minutes seem to have barely elapsed before first a faint whimper is heard, and then a chorus of music proclaiming that the puppies have found already, and are running their game right merrily.

By the time that the sweet silvery-voiced chimes high up in solemn St. Mary's tower had proclaimed eleven, Littleton

streets were swarming with an excited holiday crowd, all pushing their way to the centre of attraction, the racecourse, a grand open stretch of ground lying at the top of the town. Farmers, in any and every variety of conveyance—springless carts with a heavy draught mare in the shafts, with the women of the household seated on chairs at the back of the conveyance, came on the scene by scores. Then there were gigs and shandrydans ; high-wheeled, gaily-painted vehicles, driven by undeniable bagmen ; a dozen or more eminently staid and sober family vehicles, the prevailing colour a brilliant chrome yellow or subdued chocolate. The ribbons in these cases were generally manipulated by coachmen so fat that they could hardly see out of their eyes, the solemn old coaches being filled by members of the county families. Presently came a couple of dashing drags, crammed in and out with light cavalry men, dare-devils every one of them, with swinging hampers full of pigeon-pies, Perigord patties, *foie gras*, Camembert, choice ham, choicer tongues, and any quantity of ‘fiz,’ ‘S. and B.,’ and other liquors beloved of racegoers attached. A few—a very few—questionable women in sly-looking broughams, who had followed on the trail of the soldiers ; a swarm of mounted men, principally farmers, and every man Jack of them good straight goers with an afternoon fox, picked their way slowly through a little army of foot-people, all pushing their way to one common goal.

‘Yoicks and away ! Get forrad, my lads !’ cheered one sturdy-limbed farmer, mounted on a great slap-dash brown, while a dozen others, taking up the well-known cry, made the street ring again with a hunting chorus dearly beloved by all jovial fox-hunters.

‘Twang twang, too-toot-too-too, tra-la-la,’ rings out a merry horn from amongst the swarming throng of people, and the next instant everybody pulls out of the way to make room for the squire, driving his hot-blooded chestnuts, as nearly thorough-bred as possible, tandem-fashion, and steering them with consummate grace, strength, and elegance, through the immense assemblage.

‘Here’s t’squire!’ cried one burly farmer on foot, giving Welford a wave of his hat as a salute; while Dr. Monckton’s cheery, good-humoured face beamed with happiness as he jumped nimbly down from the dog-cart, giving himself a shake on the broad steps of the Lamb’s hospitable portals, to see, as he said, that none of his bones were jolted out of place.

The smart groom ran to the head of the chestnuts, and Welford went in at once to see if Tatham had yet gone on.

‘Bless you! yes, sir,’ cried the cheery-cheeked hostess, with an admiring glance at his handsome face and stalwart figure. ‘Been gone this ten minutes or more. He said he wouldn’t wait with the young horse, on account of the crowd.’

‘Many thanks!’ laughed George, as, sharp enough, he detected the somewhat prolonged stare. In half a dozen strides he was in the crowded street again.

‘Now, Monckton, up you go. Tatham’s gone on. Ha! how do you do, Colonel Lascelles?’

This latter greeting, jovial and cheery as usual, was addressed to a weather-beaten, soldierly-looking man, grim and grey as an Indian boar, who was riding slowly by, mounted on a magnificent grey weight-carrier, as good in the

field as he was on parade, and who pulled up when he saw Welford.

‘Very well, thanks. How are you? By-the-bye, Welford, who rides for you to-day?’

‘Ludlow. Why?’

‘Oh, nothing, mere curiosity, as I had not heard. Shall you win, think you?’

‘Pon my honour, I know not,’ he returned carelessly. ‘My trainer thinks my young one is a good horse, but, personally, I know little or nothing of him.’

‘You have backed him, of course?’

‘I’ve got a hundred on, colonel, at ten to one. You may stand a “pony” if you like.’

‘Thanks! I’ll wait. I should like to have a look at him first; and besides, I rather fancy that Seamstress filly will beat you.’

‘All right; but I bet you a score I beat that, wherever they finish.’

‘I’ll take you a level hundred—just a sporting bet, you know; best of one, two, three.’

‘Done! It’s a bet! I shall see you, I hope, presently;’ and George turned to gather up his reins, while the colonel, with a stiff military salute, turned his horse’s head once more for the course.

George pushed and squeezed his high-mettled horses through the ranks of the mob as best he could, and presently, telling Monckton to sit fast, sent them, with a rare bit of coachmanship, sharp round a corner, and full tilt up a somewhat less crowded by-road—the folks scampering out of the way quickly—which he knew led again into the high-

road to the course. On ahead, as he piloted his horses carefully through the crowd, he caught sight of Tatham, together with Ludlow and Patsy, the latter two carrying the saddles and furniture between them. You see, in those days jockeys were not driven on to the course in swell broughams, neither did they require the services of a private valet to esquire them. The old man walked at the head of the colt, carefully picking his way on the narrow slip of greensward, and keeping up a running fire of banter with the tenants of the cavalry drag, who had the road at that point very much to themselves.

‘Hoi, owd Bilberry nose!’ shouted one newly-fledged cornet, boasting of a budding bed of down on his upper lip, from the roof of the drag on which he was seated, mimicking, as well, the old man’s North-country twang, ‘Hoo’s tha’ colt bred—is he a Sir Hercules?’

‘Nay, Capt’n Papboat, hoo’s nane of Sir Hercules—some’at more o’ thy own strain—— Come up, horse!’ and then he raised his voice as he shouted, ‘Hoo’s by Lance-Corporal out o’ Washerwoman, by Bum Bailee!’

A roar of laughter greeted the old man’s reply, made all the more cutting from the fact that it was notorious the youngster’s sire had married his cook, the cornet himself being the result of such high alliance.

‘Had you there, Dickey, I do think,’ said one tawny-whiskered fellow quietly, while such a dose of chaff was showered upon the unfortunate sub’s head, that he would have given a good deal had he left measuring wits with ‘old Bilberry nose’ for a more fortunate opportunity.

The next instant the trainer was on the greensward of the

racecourse, and hearing Welford shout to him, gave the horse's leading rein to Patsy, enjoining him not to let him stir, and at the same time bidding Ludlow to 'let no one come anigh him.'

'I just missed you, Tatham, by ten minutes. I'll go and get these horses taken out, and then join you in the paddock. All right, I suppose?'

'As a gross o' trivets, sir. Ar saw Blake this mornin', and he tells ma they've got t' meer vary well and fit.'

'All right Nat ; go on. Ha ! how do you do, Morton?—and your wife? 'Pon my honour, although it sounds almost like heresy, I think,' said George, raising his hat gallantly, 'the most beautiful woman in the county.'

Yes, there was Joe on his hack, looking happy and radiant, and Lizzie—peerless Lizzie, in all the glory of her devilish beauty, her younger sister by her side—driving the brown ponies easily and well in hand, undoubtedly the most lovely woman out that day.

'Fie, Mr. Welford, you are a flatterer!' cried Lizzie, making a charming little grimace. 'Think of some one at the Hall, and then draw your contrast.'

'Well, I said it was almost heresy,' said George, true and straight as an arrow ; 'and yet I stick to what I said. But you'll forgive me ; I shall get into a tangle with these brutes if I hold them any longer. Good-bye !' and raising his hat as though Lizzie and her sister owned, both of them, crowned heads, and with a cheery nod to Joe, the master of Alcaston gave his fidgety, foam-flecked horses their heads, and was off down the side of the race-track to find a quiet place for his cattle.

‘Hi ! hi ! hi ! Come and see my bootiful dochter—nineteen year old, and six-and-twenty stun in weight ! Come and see my bonnie wife, as kin give her ten stun, and eat two legs o’ mutton for her dinner ! Costs me over a pound a day she does in grub alone, and it’s only a penny to see the pair of ’em !’ Bang ! bang !—this latter sound was caused by nervous strokes inflicted on a gong—‘Hoi ! hi ! hi ! Going in now ! Just agoin’ to begin ! The rale prize women o’ Europe, seen by all the kings and queens as ever lived !’ So screamed a fat, merry-eyed rascal outside a show, whereon was painted the supposed representation of two monster women.

‘Hi ! hi ! What do you think o’ this ?’ roared another, in a deep bass voice. ‘The only real living skellington ! Be in time ! be in time ! Eats one egg a week, he does ; lives the rest of his time on my Grand Elliptical, Essential, Panticurical, Nervous Cordial, warranted to cure all diseases incident to the human frame ! Be in time ! Be in time ! A hoppertunity as will never occur again !’

‘Now then, my noble captain !’ yelled a hook-nosed, crafty-eyed scoundrel ; ‘try your luck at my little table. Yer see there’s three little thimbles and one small pea. A half a crown to a suv’ring—or ten, it don’t matter to me—as you can’t tell me which of the three little thimbles the little pea—— Done again, by Jove ! That’s a sovereign to you, sir. You always wins, you do ; as sure as my father made me learn the Catechism backwards for luck.’

‘If the skellington is not sufficient attraction, there’s the learned pig inside as will tell you how many children you’ll have—an invaluable thing for married ladies—how many



times your husband kisses his sweetheart, and how many he's got. Likewise, what yer wife says to the gentleman when he comes to wind the clock—a thing as yer all ought to know. D'yer hear, you married unfortnits? And there's the Nervous Cordial, made from the rarest plants of Peru, and of wonderful wirtues. Give you a hinstance? I'll give you fifty. Shut up with your blessed fat women next door, there, d'yer hear! Hi! hi! listen to me. A poor fellow was passing the powder magazine wot exploded at Erith the other day. Awful cut-astropher! His legs was bust off, and his arms was bust off. Fortunately, I was a-passing at the time, and fortunately I escaped injury. What did I do? why, like a Christian, I made him swallow a dose of my Grand Elliptical, Essentientical, Panticurical, Nervous Cordial, warranted to cure all diseases incident to the human frame. The result? Miraculous! The first dose rallied him from his dispepsia choral, or comatose state; the second collected his scattered fragments; the third rejoined his poor dismembered body; and the fourth sent him home in a showful cab to the bosom of his rejoicing family! Talk about yer hinstances; what do you think of that? Be in time! The Living Skellington, the Learned Pig, and the Wonderful Cordial, only one penny a bottle. Heals all diseases. Makes yer love yer mother-in-law—and your wife's sister likewise. Cures spazzums, ticdolly-rue. Heals a woman's honour—patches up a man's. Taken constantly, yer never makes bad debts, and if you do get lushy, hi! my bonnie coves! here's the stuff to put you straight agin.'

'Hi! hi! look here! My noble sportsmen, jist look here!' wheezed a dreadful-looking object, with one eye in full and

the other in half-mourning—a gentleman whose notions of full-dress consisted of a dirty pair of patched corduroys and a still dirtier blue jersey. ‘Brummy the Black, as fut Tom Sayers. Conky (*halius* the Muzzler), fut for the championship and £500 a side. All in to begin. Two friends. Fust sparrin’-booth in England—patronized by the Queen and his Royal ‘Ighness the Hemperor o’ the French! It’s a penny—d’ye hear?—a penny to see the Muzzler spar with the Black as fut Tom Sayers for the championship!’

‘Gingerbread-nuts and almond-rock, a penny a packet!’

‘Hurroo! The hemperor of lion-tamers! The great Mexican lion-tamer, Don Gonzalez de Badajoz!’

‘Six to four on the field!’ ‘Two to one bar one!’ ‘The field a pony!—I’m betting on the fust race!’—‘The field a pony!—Does anybody know anything?’ ‘Two to one bar one!’ ‘The field a po-ny!’

This was the grand climacteric chorus. In time the lion-tamer and fat women showmen, the exhibitors of living skeletons, gingerbread-nut sellers, and the exponents of the noble art of self-defence, were all hushed, forgotten, and swallowed up in the strident roar and bray of battle emitted by the champions of the betting-ring: ‘Two to one bar one!’ ‘The field a pony!’

In the ring and at the foot of the Grand Stand all was hubbub and excitement. Ring-men and backers, Jews and touts—the men who could tell you all the secrets of a big stable for half a crown—thieves and fools, legs and sharps, moon-faced men who looked simple as children, men with the souls of eagles and the consciences of vultures, gents and gentlemen, jockeys and trainers, handsome women and

ugly ones, swarmed here, there, and everywhere. Lascelles, Welford, and Monckton—the two former cool as cucumbers, the latter with his heart in a fever of excitement, and ready to fight anybody for twopence, who ventured to think that Welford's colt could be beaten—stood in a group in the paddock, watching the string of youngsters slowly pacing round and round, nearly all of them as quiet as sheep, save one, the Seamstress filly—a hot favourite in the ring—who seemed, perhaps, to bear her high honours uneasily, and be fretful and peevish in consequence.

'She's a sweet filly, Welford,' said Lascelles, as the handsome bay came in sight again, chafing and fretful under the restraining hand of the lad on her back, while her trainer walked at her head, patting her shining neck, and soothing her with hand and voice.

'Very. As nice a mare as man need wish to see—but a little too fidgety to please me.'

'Ah! you're prejudiced. I suppose you think it a certainty for your colt?'

'Not a bit of it. He'll run well, I dare say; and he may win.'

'By the same rule, he may not,' said the colonel, a bit spitefully.

'Precisely,' chimed in the colt's owner, and his hearty face beamed bright as a star. 'By-the-bye, Lascelles, I want a name for my colt. Can you suggest one? He's by Lord of the Soil out of Grasshopper, you know.'

'Hum! Well, call him Clodhopper.'

'Doesn't sound like a Derby winner, does it? But, thanks, very much. He stands "Clodhopper" for the rest of his days.'

At this moment the saddling-bell rang, while the roar of the ring grew every instant more frantically hoarse, amidst which, as it seemed from the constant ejaculation of the filly's name, she had made herself no new friends by her fretfulness. The Grand Stand was crammed with a sea of heads. The crowd swarming over the course suddenly melted away, and creeping under the rails, found refuge or standing-places goodness only knows where. Then the horses emerged from the paddock. Welford's conspicuous colours, French grey body and scarlet sleeves, leading the way, with Samuel Ludlow, Esq., sometime dealer in tapes and laces, sitting quietly in the saddle, the picture of content with himself and his horse. The Seamstress filly was the last, and lashed out viciously, as nearly as possible upsetting Jem Templeman—one of the best jockeys of the day—by her ugly vagaries.

‘Kip away from yon filly, Sam,’ was Tatham's last order.

Sam nodded, and, putting his horse into a canter, Clod-hopper stole down the course like a piece of machinery, while the old man sauntered back to get a good place near the rails of the betting-ring.

One by one the bright patches of colour—some half-dozen of them—mustered at the post, the filly behaving herself far better than was expected, and making fresh friends as folks saw that she had sobered down. The roar and gabble of the ring was the chief sound heard now. The spectators were hushed in expectation of seeing the signal for starting. Two or three breaks-away occurred, amongst them always the filly. At last, as the sun flashed on the bright silken jackets, the sleek coats of the beauties in line yet once again, down

went the flag. 'They're off!' screamed hundreds of throats. No; Mr. Samuel Ludlow's brown colt, grown a bit peevish and fretful, whipped round at the last moment; so back they went again, ranging themselves afresh under the starter's eye. At last came the most unmistakable shout from one end of the course to the other, and then began the utterance of excited opinions. Sam had a berth next the rails, while the filly held a line to herself in the middle.

'Blue wins! Seamstress wins!'

'Thoo's a liar! it don't for a poond. Shairpshooter wins! black wins! hooray, Shairpshooter!'

'Seamstress wins for money!'

'Thou's beat, Nat, lad,' roared a burly York book-maker, shutting up his glasses, and leaning towards Tatham; 'thou's beat!'

The next instant, and before Tatham could muster up a reply, a roar rent the air of 'T' squire wins! grey jacket wins! Grasshopper colt wins!

'By heaven he does!' cried Lascelles, who had been watching the race at Welford's elbow, with just a shade, no more, of anxiety in his voice; 'he wins in a walk. I owe you a hundred, Welford.'

It was a consummate bit of judgment, and Sam won by the skin of his teeth, waiting for the last run, and catching the filly almost within the shadow of the post. 'Won by a head,' was the judge's verdict; a narrow thing, but just as Tatham would have had it.

'Did I do right, master?' asked Sam eagerly, as he brought his horse back to scale, leaning over and patting the colt's neck.

‘Thoo did, lad. Ar couldn’t ha’ done better, meysen,’ answered the old man, while his face twitched and worked up under excitement into a thousand curious curves and wrinkles. ‘Ride t’other to-morrow like it, and I’ll mak’ thy fortun’.’

Perhaps there was a larger crowd the second day. There were certainly more ladies present, the stand assuming, presently the aspect, as seen from a distance, of a big flower parterre, from the variegated patches of colour in the women’s dresses. ‘Our Lizzie’ was, of course, there, handsome as a dream, and, curiously enough, as she drove her ponies over the heath, a gipsy-faced fellow, who had been running by the side of the ponies—unobtrusively, of course—for some little distance, took instant advantage of Joe’s pulling up his bay for a moment’s chat with a friend, and shooting to the side of the low carriage with the speed of a hare, slipped a note into sweet Mrs. Morton’s hand, saying, half breathlessly and in evident haste, ‘For you!’ In an instant he was gone, leaving ‘our Lizzie’ for a second’s space in a state of intense wonderment. Then she quietly and deliberately pulled her ponies up, and opening a little sealskin bag lying before her, slipped the note just as quietly in. Directly afterwards Joe rode up at a canter, and—‘She told him all about it, says dear little demure Mrs. Patience Prim.’ ‘Not she,’ Lizzie would have said, had you put the question to her; ‘that was not half good enough.’

George had brought his wife to see his horse win, and there sat pure-souled Mary Welford, with her eyes wandering listlessly from one object to another, a half-surprised, half-amused expression on her somewhat pale yet beautiful face,

with her heart far away with her idolized boy, and her mind wondering whether Sally Hough was watching him through his morning sleep. Round here were grouped several ladies, amongst them Mrs. Colonel Lascelles, a beautifully preserved woman. A woman who owed everything to her stays, a mouth full of glistening teeth and enamel. A woman who dared to laugh and show her perfect-fitting weapons, although her face seemed moulded, and a miracle of high-art plastering. Then there was the Dowager Lady Deuceace, a frank, impulsive creature of sixty or so, who didn't paint, and meant the world to know it, just as if the world couldn't see the horrible colour of her sallow, parchment-dried face with its own eyes ; and who, in spite of her charming air of candour, would have robbed you of your last shilling. Next the Misses Diana and Violet Pugsby, not bad-looking girls, but shockingly fast and overdressed, daughters of Captain Pugsby, of the Hollies, widower and unattached ; and Mary Dacre, a sweet, lovable girl, sister to a poor devil of a curate, with a hundred a year, six children to keep, and a notoriously unhealthy parish.

The two Mariess sat together ; it was natural they should. Lady Deuceace and Mary Welford, side by side, would have looked not unlike a ragged-throated vulture and a cushat ; Mrs. Lascelles and Mary Dacre, a hollyhock towering over a snowdrop.

'Who is that very pretty woman below us, love?' said Mary Dacre in low tones. 'A fair-haired woman, girl almost, with a charming black and white bonnet?'

The mistress of Alcaston looked carelessly along the rows of heads beneath her, and full into the delicious face of

'our Lizzie,' whose features instantly rippled into laughter, and who nodded with an amount of assurance which Mary returned with a cold bend of the head.

'Why, you know her !' continued Miss Dacre. 'Isn't she lovely !'

'Very, darling. It is Mrs. Morton, of Littlewash Mill Farm. There is her husband—that fine tall fellow talking to George. There, see, just beside that dreadful man with that immense umbrella. I do hope George is not betting heavily !'

'You don't like her, Mary?' queried the other.

'Frankly, I do not ; and yet I sincerely pity her, although I can hardly tell you why. I feel instinctively, however, that she is not a woman whom I could both love and respect, for instance, as I do you.' And Mary Welford patted her friend's pretty gloved hand affectionately.

'Not quite the thing, though, is it, to dislike a person for you know not what?' said the owner of the pretty hand, half reprovingly ; 'and she is really very lovely.'

'Who is?' cried Violet Pugsby, a girl with an impudent nose of the *retroussé* order. 'I'm dying to know, Miss Dacre.'

'We were talking of Mrs. Morton,' replied Mary Welford.

'Oh, quite awfully lovely,' assented Violet. 'Pa says he never knew a woman possessing such perfect features before. A terrible flirt, though, according to a whole legion of people ; and of course where there's smoke there's generally fire. I shouldn't care to be Mr. Morton, if all I hear is only half true !'

'Ah !' croaked Lady Deuceace spitefully ; 'you might care to inherit the lady's position better, Violet dear !'



‘Ridiculous, Lady Deuceace ! A miller ! a farmer ! I should as soon think of marrying my groom !’

‘I didn’t know you had one, dear !’ and the wicked old wrinkled throat looked for all the world like a spiteful vulture’s preparing to peck. ‘Where did you buy your horse?’ she continued, ‘and when? and, dear me ! can he jump ? Oh, I am sure he can jump,’ she said, clasping her hands with youthful fervour ; ‘and presently you must sing us, you know—what is it ? Oh, “With a hey, ho, chevy ; hark forward, hark forward, tantivy !”—a perfectly charming hunting-song. But what on earth is that bell ?’

‘The horses are going down to the starting-post, Lady Deuceace. See, Mary love, there’s Giovanni. Isn’t he a dear old darling of a horse ?’

Again the green ribbon of turf seemed to grow from under the feet of the hurrying crowds of people, seeking points of vantage. The bray and roar of the ring grew incessant, while every now and again one’s ear was riveted by the sound of some particularly harsh and strident voice shouting out the state of the odds.

‘I’ll lay three to one again’ Georgyvanna ; three to one I’ll lay Georgyvanna. Five to one bar one. Frenzy ? five to one, sir.’

‘Geevanna, sir ? Full’

‘Ten to one bar a couple ! Three to one Geevanna . I want to lay again’ Geevanna.’

Clang, clang ! clang, clang ! All this time the bell has been dinning out its monotonous clink clank above the heads of people hurrying from one point to another, eagerly scanning the numbers of the horses up, and the names of

their riders. At last the broad green ribbon is clear, and with a thump! thump! thump! one horse after another tears past the Grand Stand, throwing up little clods and lumps of dirt with their hind-legs high in the air as they shoot past.

‘Here’s the favourite! Here’s the squire’s horse!’ and from a given point every now and then Master Samuel Ludlow got a hearty, rattling cheer from knots of Welford’s tenants as the great brown stole past them, with Sam’s silk jacket puffed out with the wind as he leaned a trifle forward over his horse’s neck. ‘Here’s t’bonnie meer!’ cheered a burly Yorkshireman, and the next instant Frenzy swept past, a glorious chestnut thoroughbred, and the picture of a race-horse, with Rattlecap, another chestnut, close at her heels.

Then came half a dozen other competitors, making a bunch of gay colours, shining coats, and swiftly-moving powerful limbs; and at last all were grouped together at the starting-post.

At the first fall of the flag they were off. Camphine, a speedy horse in Blake’s stable, making running for the mare. Sam pulled his horse back, and got his favourite place on the rails, never taking his eye off the rider of his most dreaded opponent, and watching for the moment when, Camphine’s bolt being shot, Frenzy would rattle out and take his place. So they progressed until winding the turn for home, where there was a straight run in. Then the tremendous volume of noise from the stand and the ring was something wonderful.

Screams for Frenzy! Roars for the favourite! Yells from the bookies for Buck Antelope, an extreme outsider who had taken a prominent place. Sam’s horse was essentially a lazy one—game as a lion, but lazy; so that,

feeling he had heaps of 'go' in him, three hundred yards from the stand he hit him smartly twice with his whip, just to wake him up.

The action was seen in an instant, and hundreds of voices proclaimed that the favourite was beaten. Sam knew better, though. Camphine's task had been over long ago, and little Tyrrell, up on the mare, now sent her along in earnest, his effort being instantly responded to by Sam again waking up the brown. Both horses shot out like arrows from a steel cross-bow, and as they passed the stand were running gamely as tigers and as honest as the daylight. Smack ! smack ! smack ! sounded the whips, The brown and the chestnut seemed locked together, and Tatham's heart beat wildly behind the iron railings separating the ribbon from the yelling throng, as he saw the mare sticking so pertinaciously to his favourite. Directly afterwards, with a sob of distress, the gallant mare cracked, and the big brown, impelled by his enormous stride, left her as if she had been standing still, with Sam straight as a die in his stirrups, and a grim smile of conquest lighting up his by no means handsome and sweat-grimed face.

Cheer after cheer, shout after shout, went up at the double triumph of Welford's popular colours—a triumph made all the greater by the magnificent fight that the mare had made.

Poor old Tatham ! For a few minutes he could hardly speak, but when he had got his jocky weighed in all right, and the horse back into his stable, he leaned his wrinkled face over the glossy neck for an instant, and when he lifted it again at Patsy's entrance, the boy said 'He'd be shot if the ould 'un hadn't got tears in his eyes !'



## CHAPTER XVII.

### LOVE VERSUS HONOUR.

ALL day long Lizzie's mind had been stretched upon a mental rack in an endeavour to guess at the source from whence the mysteriously delivered note had sprung. Reviewing the long list of her former conquests, she asked herself a thousand times from which love-stricken hind, watching the play of her exquisite features upon the opening race-day, and who had gone home to madly brood thereon, chafing his heart and champing with jealousy over the lost prize won and worn by honest Joe, had the letter come. But, think and ponder as she would, she could fasten upon no solitary man whom she could believe would be guilty of such chivalric devotion, allied to so much rank folly. 'Boors, wretched, low-souled boors and clodhoppers—men who would never so much as dream of delicious after-marriage flirtations,' she assured herself over and over again. Yet there was the tantalizing note lying close to her fingers, her eager, itching, pretty fingers, burning to open it, and so to make herself mistress of its delightful contents. But how could she do so? Hundreds of eyes, some honestly admiring eyes, doubtless; others full of burning love; many, many more—black, blue, grey, and brown—among the women

present, were brimming over, so full were they of hate, envy, and jealousy. All were watching her, so that she felt she could not open a note which might have the effect of suffusing her fair face and slender, graceful throat with telltale blushes—guilty blushes, as every woman would have sworn without an instant's hesitation. No, she dared not open her letter, simply because she felt certain it was—as duchesses and housemaids alike have it—‘a love-letter,’ and she was afraid of blushing dreadfully ; for, curiously enough, amongst the few womanly traits of character which Mrs. Morton never lost was that absurd pretext for asserting a claim to modesty, and particularly amongst women—blushing.

So through the long, gloriously sunny autumn day she had sat, at one time amused by the motley gathering, at another hating the mischance which gave her possession of a missive so flavoured with delicious mystery at such an inauspicious moment. Hers was a soul as full of ambition and love of conquest over men as ever was Catherine of Russia's ; moreover, she was as unscrupulous and cruel, and as full of devilish cunning as Lucretia Borgia.

‘Joe, dear old pet,’ she began, with a plaintive, half-suffering quaver in her flute-toned voice when her husband came up to her full of the pleasure of victory, and directly after the conclusion of the big race—‘Joe, nasty old dreadful gambling man ! your ’ickle woman is so awfully tired !’

‘Tired, darling, already !’ cried Joe, as much surprised to hear such a thing from his wife as man could well be. ‘Why, the day's hardly begun, sweetheart ! and I'd have thought you'd never be tired of being the queen over a lot of pretty women. What do you think, blue eyes, I heard

Colonel Lascelles say a while ago ?' queried Joe, as he edged in somehow by her side.

'What?' she asked wearily, and a trifle testily, a very different intonation from the flute just now.

'Promise me ten kisses, and I'll tell you,' he whispered.

'Rubbish, Joe ; you know you'll have the kisses whether I care for them or not. What did the colonel say ?'

'Well, he just said,' exclaimed Joe, rather loudly at first, but lowering his voice afterwards to a lower key, 'he just said that of all the women he had ever met he had seen none to compare with a certain little woman I know ;' and Joe looked at her with his eyes full of ridiculously dog-like affection.

'Ah !' whispered Lizzie. 'And that little woman'—the flute was in full force again—'tells her great nasty ugly Joe that she's tired, and wants to go home to baby.'

'Well, love,' said Joe, in a disappointed manner, 'then I'll see about the horses at once.'

'Only the ponies, mind, Joe. I won't have you come, although I dare say you'll ruin us all, great big gambler as you are.' (Flute again.)

'But, my dear Lizzie, you cannot go home by yourself, such a day as this ; the ponies will get frightened, and run away with you.'

'Now, Joe, once for all, I mean what I say.' (*Basso profondo* this time.) 'You know I hate nonsense, as I hope I hate Satan. I will not spoil your day, and I am equally determined to go home ; so go and get me my ponies—the darlings !—walk by my side until we get clear of the booths and gipsies, and then rejoin your friends. Pray don't make a

noodle of yourself, or me ridiculous, so do just as I tell you.'

Blithe-hearted Joe knew full well by this time that to argue with his beautiful wife upon any point was so much lost time. He knew also that if she made up her mind to do a certain thing it would be just about as easy to thrust a lighted coal into a barrel of powder and try to hold the lid on as turn her from her purpose. He felt equally certain that if he didn't see to the harnessing of the ponies she would, so, like a sensible man, he started to do it ; whilst she, with many a sweet smile and daintily-uttered apology for troubling other people, rose from her seat, and went to the foot of the stairs, up which she knew her husband must come to meet her.

In less than a quarter of an hour afterwards she had silenced all her husband's scruples—imperatively silenced them at last—had gained her point, had left the bustling, yelling throng far behind, and had turned her pretty pair of browns, as evenly matched as any pair of ponies in England, down a quiet bramble-hedged lane, on her way to the mill, where she could pull up and read her letter in peace.

Methodical and careful in many things, if reckless in others, she first knotted the thin reins round the iron rail of the splash-board, and then, with her heart slightly fluttering, opened the sealskin-bag. Did she know the hand? She turned the little missive over and over, scanning first the superscription and then the imprint of the gipsy's grimy thumb and finger. No. A firm, clear, masculine hand, but one utterly unknown to her, so that while the ponies cropped the long grass and daisies in the hedge bottom, she quietly broke the seal.

Highly dishonourable to peer over the fair dame's shoulder; we'll risk it, however, and see what her unknown correspondent has to say for himself:

'DEAR MRS. MORTON' (so ran the missive),

'I hardly know what excuse to offer in extenuation of the folly I am committing in writing to you. I hardly know of any earthly reason why I should hope that you will give my letter an instant's attention. Something, however, seems to whisper to me that you will; so I write, trusting the fate of my note to you and chance fortune.

'I am going away from home—from England—for a long time; perhaps for ever. Ever since the night of that, to me, fateful ball, I have never been able to erase the haunting memory of your eyes, or forget a woman, the owner of a lovely face, who but for my own cursed folly I might have called my own. Heaven alone knows how dearly I have since prized so slight a remembrance, or how bitterly I have execrated my own short-seeing.

'I cannot go without bidding you good-bye—I cannot, Lizzie darling! Do forgive my impertinence, I pray you; and let me add that I write to say that, on pretence of fishing, I shall hang about Dunsey Weir Fall all the afternoon, in the possible hope of seeing you. Can you contrive it? If you will, I ask you but for ten minutes of your time, so that I may carry with me to India a better and clearer recollection of a face that haunts me, rendering my life one long misery.

'George and I have had the devil's own row. For the sake of auld langsyne, whether you come or no, tell no one that you have heard from

'HUBERT WELFORD.'

For an instant her face expressed nothing more than blank surprise and incredulity. 'Hubert!' she softly murmured,



while her hands fell idly and listlessly into her lap—‘Hubert ! It seems impossible !’ And then her lovely eyes filled with a look of soft delicious languor, as different from any with which she had ever favoured the rightful lord of her bosom as a pure diamond of the first water is distinct from a lump of sandstone. None save herself knew how deeply the brilliant, dashing cavalry soldier had driven his lance when he and she together had had that little love tournament in auld langsyne, of which the reader knows something. None save herself knew how bitter had been the struggle within her own fair bosom before she had been enabled to throw off the traces of the first genuine ‘smite’ to which she had succumbed. Hundreds of times she had pictured to herself the gay *débonnair* Hubert, the *beau sabreur*, gallant and courteous as a prince, soft-handed, deliciously perfumed, and wearing clothes that fitted him like a kid glove. Then she had drawn terrible comparisons between him and stalwart Joe, hard-handed, and bronzed with the summer sun, wearing coats with big pockets, into which he could drop a hare when necessary, and a felt hat, out of all shape, round which was generally wound a cast of flies and some shining gut traces.

Scores of times she had lain by his side and literally shuddered, as, wide awake, her busy brain occupied in drawing pictures of what might have been, she heard in the still night the heavy laboured breathing of the tired Hercules sleeping by her side, and contrasted that with the balmy sighs she felt assured would issue from Hubert’s lungs. Practically, Joe was snoring—not a doubt about it—and she hated him for it ; hated herself for linking her fate to a man whom she

did not care a button about, and but for whom—as she told herself over and over again, with the inconsistency common to women of her type—she might have been in so different a position, and up to her eyebrows in the sea of fashionable existence.

She utterly forgot Hubert's careless indifference during that memorable interview in the Lime Walk. She only remembered that he was as handsome as Apollo ; that he had taken her by storm, battering down the defences to what she thought was an unassailable fortress ; that he waltzed like no other human being in all Alcaston ; that he bore himself gallantly, treating Joe with any amount of contempt, and that some day he might be master of Alcaston.

If she ever had a trace of affection for her husband, the quiet life she led day by day, the monotony of each succeeding month, within hearing of the clatter of the mill, the ceaseless swash and roar of the water at the head of the pool, blotted it out gradually, until she in reality cared for him no more than she cared for the sheep-dog that used to follow her about the farm with dumb, mute, loving eyes. When her child was born, the sorry second-hand love woke up a little, perhaps, and she put her arm round his neck, kissing him with a genuine show of feeling that made the tears well up in honest Joe's eyes, and his big heart nigh burst as he thought how dearly he was loved by this peerless woman, the mother of his child. Poor devil ! had he known what she was thinking about within the next hour, he had better, perhaps, have tied one end of a string to his big toe, and the other to the trigger of his gun, and blown his brains out, because she was thinking, as she looked in the baby's face,

how dearly she would have loved it had its father's name been Hubert, telling herself that if it had been so, its eyes would have been of the colour of the wood violets, and its nose, instead of being something like a button-mushroom slightly crushed, would have been just like that of the Parian Cupid's on her dressing-table.

Swiftly reviewing the hundreds of thoughts that came surging up in her mind, Lizzie systematically marshalled them and set them in order. That she loved Hubert Welford deeply and passionately, she knew only too well, and her first impulse was to give her ponies their heads, and go straight to him. But then, like a prudent general, she took in all the features of the impending battle between herself and the gallant captain in the event of her meeting him, and the extreme probability that he, with his unquestionable sharp-sightedness in such like matters, would see at once how badly her position was defended, and take instant advantage of the opportunity afforded him. She felt that she could not rely upon herself. You see she was not a good woman, otherwise she could have done so ; and as she looked at the ponies—Joe had bought them alone for her, as a source of gratification and pleasure—why she was obliged to own that she owed everything she had in the world to him, even to the very bonnet which had been a source of such envy amongst her acquaintances that afternoon, and altogether she asked herself: was going to meet dangerous Hubert really good enough?

No, she didn't think it was ; but then he was going away, she argued, and she might never see his handsome face again. Heaven knew what might become of him ; and if

he loved her—there was the warranty for it in her very hands—he longed to see her for a moment only before he shook the dust of England from his feet. How cruel to refuse him ; and how much more did she long to see him ! Ah ! only for one instant, to feel the thrill of his hand as it met hers, the grasp of his fingers ; to see the love-light blaze in his blue eyes ; to kiss him, perhaps, once again, and drink in the subtle draught of Love's dangerous elixir. Quick as thought her trembling fingers untied the knot in the reins, and lashing her ponies, in the first impulses of a heart bounding at fever-heat, they sprang forward with a jerk that nigh broke their hold upon her fragile wrist, going swift and straight as arrows down the road leading direct to Dunsey Weir Fall.

What on earth would he think of her ? It was barely four o'clock. She was coming straight to the rendezvous as hard as the ponies could pelt, with a flaming face and excited manner, and every evidence that she had flown at once to meet him, directly on the receipt of his letter. Clearly that would not do. Dearly as she fancied she loved the young officer, she did not care to show her hand too plainly, because she had in the long-run a difficult game to play.

So she once more pulled the ponies up, trying hard to still the beatings of her guilty heart, and recover her usual air of quiet dignity. Then, as she did so, a still, small voice pleaded hard for Joe and honour's sake—for the sake of the little child at home ; and she, listening for a brief moment, in the next throttled the small voice with her iron will, so that, expiring with a faint cry, it spoke no more, and she still pushed her way onwards to Dunsey Weir Fall.

At the very next bend of the lane she knew she would be in sight of the foaming pool, with its thunderous plashing fall of water, hurrying onward to greet its mother, the sea. Knew that she would be in full sight of the old worm-eaten, rickety handrail and narrow footpath spanning the fall of water—in sight of the trembling, drooping willows bounding the opposite shore, under which she guessed he was lazily lying, and even yet—ah ! up spoke the little voice again, the only champion poor Joe had—she might turn back. But no, she went on, and in another instant was in sight of a solitary figure standing just beyond the narrow footboard, with rod in hand, the sunlight flashing upon it every now and again as he moved it, and who was seemingly really absorbed in his occupation of fishing, for he was spinning diligently and slowly, as though in expectation every moment of a run.

She knew it was him in an instant. To a woman there is no mistaking a man whom she nightly dreams about, and as she walked her ponies quietly along the gravelly, pebbly shore of the river, she watched him to see what he would do when he first saw her. The roar of the fall had drowned the noise of the wheels as they grated over the gravel, and just at that moment he was intent upon his fishing.

Suddenly he raised his eyes, and in a second's space down went the rod—he never stopped to see if the winch-handles were clear, as some of us might have done—and with a bound he made for the footboard. That hasty movement was joy unspeakable to the woman waiting for him, for it was so utterly unlike his usual studied coolness and aristocratic languor, that if she had a lingering doubt of his love it was

gone from that instant ! Straight across the crazy old planks he came, nearer each instant. How her heart surged and thumped under her dainty scarlet corset, as she watched the flashing eyes and eager steps of him who came to meet her ! Once he slipped on the slimy, moss-grown planks, slippery with the constant dash of the spray flung high by the bounding flood ; and, silly girl, she nearly screamed ! She was very glad she did not, though, and in the next instant he stood by the side of the low carriage with her hand clasped tight and firm between his. Neither spoke for a few seconds, but both looked deep into the depths of each other's eyes, as though they were the pages of an open book.





## CHAPTER XVIII.

### CONCERNING THE FLOUR TRADE.

‘MRS. MORTON ! Lizzie ! I cannot sufficiently thank you !’ And the speaker’s blue orbs shone full of chivalric devotion, while his voice sounded above the roar of the falling water, softened somewhat by the distance, low and harmoniously.

‘Captain Welford, I owe it to myself,’ began Joe’s wife, ‘to make some explanation. You must not think that I came here to meet you. Of course I had the letter, but indeed, never dreaming of whom it came from, I had forgotten all about it. I was on my way home to baby, and it was not until I was close here that I recollected the note lying there in my bag. Then I read it, and need hardly say how great was my surprise. I ought to have turned back at once, I know, but this was my nearest way home ; and then—and then——’ She broke down at this point of her explanation—rather a lame one—while her face glowed rosy red under the captain’s look of quiet attention.

‘And then, Lizzie, I suppose you thought you would give a poor, lovesick devil one more peep at his goddess—was that it ?’

‘You must not speak to me of love, Captain Welford. Remember, I am now another man’s wife.’

A sad, sad pity that she had not recollected the fact sooner.

‘I am not likely to forget it, Mrs. Morton,’ said Hubert reflectively; ‘now less than ever, for you are lovelier even than when I first saw you. By-the-bye, how is the worthy miller? What a handsome pair of ponies!’

The old gay, *débonnair* air and grace which had first charmed her were still present, and, as she looked into his handsome face and flashing eyes, she felt her heart fluttering wildly, and a strange, indescribable longing, a sense of mad, ungovernable passion, filling her very soul.

She did not answer him, but sat looking straight before her, with her rounded, dimpled chin poised in her open palm, her very being wrapped in dreamy meditation, not of the angels, but having its origin in devilish treachery.

The silence was at last broken by Hubert, who said, with dancing eyes: ‘Do you know, Lizzie, I have had such fun. I, who never caught a fish in my life before, have hooked and killed a beauty.’

He had, in more senses than one.

‘Have you?’ she replied, while a worn, weary, *distracte* look settled upon her fair face; a face so exquisitely lovely that a saint might have been pardoned almost for forgetting his holy vows. ‘I am very glad.’

The vague, far-off look caught his attention in a moment, and he leaned over the side of the low carriage, almost whispering in her ear: ‘You are troubled, child; tell me what it is.’

‘It is nothing,’ she replied. ‘I was thinking.’

‘Thinking of what?’

‘Of what might have been,’ she said gravely, with a little



musical inflection of her flute-like voice. 'But, Captain Welford, you tell me you are going abroad, and that you wish to bid me good-bye. Is it true?'

'Perfectly true, Lizzie; the regiment has orders for foreign service. I surmise we shall go to Bengal—a beastly, fever-ridden place, I expect—and the probability is that I may never see you again. Ah, Lizzie darling, you don't know how the memory of that night is stamped upon my recollection!'

'Is it?' she said dreamily.

'Yes; more deeply than you will perhaps ever believe. But I have so much to say to you, and this place is so open. May I get in for a moment while you turn the ponies up the lane?'

'Yes, if you like!' she said, and made room for him at her side. Instead of that, however, he screwed himself up on the fleecy rug at her feet, and put his curly head upon her knees, and she, Joe's wife, never so much as repulsed him by a single gesture, but sat, with her frame quivering and trembling from head to foot.

Not for long, however, was the gallant officer content to sit in even so enviable a position, for presently, as the ponies paced leisurely under the shadow of a great oak, flinging its sturdy arms half over the lane, he raised himself and took the vacant seat by her side, while she, at the same time, stopped the browns, who at once began to nibble the short, sweet grass.

'Now, my own darling,' he began, the while he slipped one hand round her slender, unresisting waist, 'you and I must bid one another a long good-bye. I think, sweet pet—my queen,' he cried passionately, 'that you have cared for me a little; dinna forget me when I am far away.'

‘Forget you, Hubert!’ she cried, with a little half-sobbing wail, while her eyes filled with soft humid light—‘forget you! Should I be here if I were likely to forget?’

In an instant, swiftly, and without a second’s hesitation, he drew her to him. Her supple, lithe form, graceful and undulating as a panther’s, for a second’s space drew back. Then he rained a shower of kisses—hot, passionate kisses—upon the lovely upturned face, and she, softly yielding, twined her fair arms round his bronzed neck, and kissed him—not once, not twice, but a dozen times—with her carnation-hued lips seeking his, devouring them in her passionate fervour; the while a baleful fire glowed like a hell in his blazing eyes.

Poor Joe!—poor, unsuspecting, trustful Joe!—happy among the fat ladies and the learned pigs. It’s a thousand to one on a certain runner in the Great Wedlock Stakes this day, or we’re all bad judges.

‘Hubert! Hubert!’ she gasped at length, ‘for God’s sake let me go home! I am ill! I am faint!’

‘Presently, mine own—presently. Try to gain strength, dear love! See, lay your face on my bosom,’ he said soothingly, and then he drew her again gently towards him, she utterly unresisting and quiescent, and occupied himself with smoothing the rebellious ripples of the glorious fair brown hair that strayed idly over her forehead.

‘Ah, sweet Lizzie! I would to heaven you were never going to leave me. What shall I do?’ he cried, in an agony of passion, very well assumed if it were not really genuine. ‘To think of you coupled for life with that coarse-bred hound is madness.’

‘Hush ! Hubert, darling. Don’t call Joe names, for he is a good man.’

‘Good man !’ he said, scornfully. ‘Yes, exactly. A good, plodding, hard-working man, with the appetite of an elephant, and hands of the consistency of a horse’s hoof. Such nails I never saw—and he owns you !—my very own, the sweetest flower in Christendom. See, sweet—that you love me I know ; leave him and tempt fortune with me. Come—we’ll go abroad together. I’ll sell out ; we’ll see Paris, with all its glittering life and wild fun ! Rome ! oh, such a glorious old place, Lizzie ! We’ll go through Switzerland, and see such sunsets as you cannot imagine even in dreams. I’ll buy a tiny little place close to one of the lakes, where the sky is always blue, and the air full of the incense of love and poetry, and there, far away from this dull, humdrum existence, we shall live the life of two of the happiest creatures under heaven’s sun.’

She nestled closer to him in reply, and stole one arm gently round his neck again.

Suddenly she bethought her of how time was flying, and, looking at her watch, found, to her dismay and horror, that the hands were creeping on towards six. Six o’clock ! Why, Joe would be at home, and what could she say, or what reason could she give for her absence ?

‘Say, darling !’ said the captain, the instant her fears were communicated to him ; ‘why, say that one of the ponies fell dead lame, and that you could not get him along.’

‘But he isn’t lame ; that is absurd.’

‘Well, it is not ten minutes’ walk from here to the mill, is it ? No. Well then, I’ll soon manage the business,’ he con-

tinued, taking out a long-bladed penknife. 'One prick with this sharp blade in the frog of the foot will make him as lame as a duck for a few days. Which of them is to be operated upon?' he concluded, gaily.

'Lame my ponies; my pets! Oh, Hubert, how could you be so cruel?' she cried, with a little sob. 'No, I must go and take my chance. I shall have to tell a terrible big story, I suppose—one of the pains and penalties incident to wrong-doing. When shall I see you again? for see you I must, now. My unfortunate head, it aches terribly.'

'Can you meet me to-night, dearest?'

'To-night? No, impossible!' she began dolefully. 'Stay, I don't know; it is Joe's whist night; three or four stupid old fogies come every Wednesday and play long whist. Oh! it is insufferably dreadful. "Four by honours and two by tricks" all night long; and I might, perhaps, slip out for an hour, say at eight or half-past.'

'Try, if it is only to give me one more delicious kiss. I will be just beyond the bridge at half-past eight. It will be dark then, and I'll wait until nine.'

'Very well, only don't be angry if I cannot come. Rely upon it, I will if it be possible. Now, good-bye, Hubert—dear Hubert.'

Once more he strained her to his bosom, kissing her lips, her hair, her eyes, with passionate fire in every action. At length he released her, and jumped from the low carriage light as an acrobat. Even then she was not satisfied, and leaned over the side towards him, stretching forth her hands, and kissing him again and again.

'Good-bye, Hubert. To-night, remember!' she murmured.

‘Good-bye, darling,’ he cried, ‘and try and come to me.’

Then she turned her ponies’ heads, and with one last lingering look straight into his face, she was gone—gone at the top speed of the little browns, who were just as anxious to get home as their mistress was.

When she reached the mill her first inquiry was for her husband. To her great delight he had not returned. Kitty Norris, a fresh, healthy girl of nineteen, her special hand-maid, came forward at once, preparing to go up to her mistress’s dressing-room—a tiny, elegantly-furnished snugger—to help her to take her dress off. To Kitty’s intense astonishment she was told that her services were not wanted on that particular evening, and that, in point of fact, her mistress would not require her again. Such a thing had never happened during the term of her service, and the girl made no little feature of it upon her return to the wide old-fashioned kitchen, giving rise to no end of spiteful gossip among the other dependents, among whom Lizzie was no favourite, as she described how flurried and agitated Mrs. Morton appeared.

The subject of the gossip, however, went straight up to her room, and, first locking the door so as to be assured against intrusion, sat down to review the many incidents of the day. A cry from the distant nursery, and coming from her baby, reached her, but, knowing that the girl was in attendance, she took no more notice of it than she did of the lowing of the cattle or the bleat of the sheep in the straw-yard. The many things that had happened seemed half incredible to her, and she caught herself vaguely wondering whether it all could be true. Not much doubt about it, for

her face yet burned with the passion of his last embrace, and his fingers seemed to be locked in hers at the very instant while she wondered.

She was hardly so fair a picture as usual, as she sat there with a look of stern, determined purpose fixed upon her features, with a few hard lines creeping round the curves of the rosy mouth and dimpled chin. 'What does it matter?' she muttered to herself. 'If I stay here now, I shall go raving mad. I love him, my Hubert!—have loved him from the very moment that I first met him at that wretched ball. Oh, this life! The thump, thump, click, clack, of that awful wheel from morning till night; the splash of that never-ceasing water—how shall I endure it now, and he far away? And yet, and yet——' and the hard lines round her mouth softened little by little, and at last faded out entirely, as a distant storm-cloud softens and grows gradually lighter under the influence of a burst of sunlight.

As she sat there she thought of the triumphs her marriage had afforded her over the Alcaston girls—the envy of them all, so badly concealed, when she first called at certain of her dear friends' homes, and they came to admire her flashing silks, her furs, her love of a bonnet, each one endeavouring to hide their all too openly shown annoyance by a show of patting and fondling the brown ponies standing quietly at the gate. She reflectively looked back upon the many occasions when she, simple Mrs. Morton of Littlewash, possessor of the most charmingly delightful knickknacks and articles of feminine adornment in the world, dresses direct from Paris, and gloves such as a duchess might have worn, had set every woman's heart in the village—at any rate,

every presentable woman—fairly panting with jealousy and envious rage. Particularly on a Sunday, and after the vicar had been more than usually impressive anent spite and envy. Little groups formed round her on Sunday mornings after divine service, ostensibly for friendly chat, congratulatory effusions, inquiries after the health of her baby and her husband, but in reality to appraise her and her belongings just as she stood, going into mental calculations all the way home as to the cost per yard of her bonnet-ribbons, what her sealskin cloak was up to, and what amount per annum she cost poor Mr. Morton in boots alone. She knew it well enough, no one better, and gloried in her triumph.

Joe did not often go to church, but one would have found him, likely enough, with a long clay pipe before the kitchen fire, intent upon a study of the *Sporting Life*, and idly rocking the cradle wherein his son and heir lay fast asleep, or else placidly sucking at a fat thumb—winking up at Joe with an air of supreme wisdom on his fat face, as though, in wondering what manner of strange animal his father was, he had just arrived at a satisfactory conclusion.

Did she remember as she sat there to whom she was indebted for all those pleasant triumphs—that multitude of happy reminiscences? Very doubtful if she ever gave Joe a thought, until she remembered that he would be home directly, if he were not already in the house; that he would ask for her instantly, and that it would be hardly politic to present herself to him without effacing all traces from her fair face of the late assaults made by the gallant captain.

To think of a thing was to do it at once with Mrs. Morton.

Thus, within ten minutes she had changed the elegant dress she had worn at the race-meeting, had laved her face, throat, and bosom in fresh cool water, dabbed her blue eyes, the colour of the petals of a harebell, and still aching forehead with a lace handkerchief dipped in eau de cologne, and put straight and smooth, save where it *would* ripple, the thick masses of her beautiful hair. Lizzie's hair, had she possessed no other charm, was almost in itself sufficient to stamp her as peerless, for it looked in bright light as though it had been dipped in molten gold. Finally she swallowed a little mixture of sal volatile and red lavender. Then she was ready to meet her husband—aye, ready as any woman could be who two hours before had gone wilfully to the thralldom of a guilty love, and who in heart at least was as vile an adulteress as ever tainted the breath of heaven.

She went downstairs, first putting her head inside the nursery to hear from the girl in charge that baby was all right, and found Joe, who had just come in, occupied in washing some blood from his face at the kitchen pump.

For just an instant she was unmistakably startled, and showed it.

‘What in the name of fate have you been doing?’ she cried, as she crossed the wide, red-bricked floor. ‘Why, you are smothered in blood!’

Terror-stricken, she asked herself whether Joe, by some unhappy accident, had met and had any altercation with her lover.

‘Oh, it's nothing, love,’ replied the big Hercules at the pump, in reassuring, quiet tones. ‘Don't you be frightened, my girl.’



She—frightened for her husband's sake ! How little the idiot knew her !

'Well, but what is it all about ? Besides, how terribly late you are !' she ejaculated angrily.

'Why, it was in this way,' explained Joe, bolstering his neck and face with a rough towel. 'Confound the blood !' he added testily, as a thin stream trickled down his forehead. 'Get a bit of sticking-plaister, love ; I've got an ugly rap on the head with a stick. Ah ! and you'd better bring a pair of scissors to cut some of the hair away.'

She got the plaister and the scissors, but she could not and would not put her fingers in blood.

'Oh, Joe !' she said plaintively, with the harebell eyes wide open ; 'you *couldn't* expect a little woman to put her fingers in blood, now, could you ? *Fingers like these, too !*' and she spread her hands out, looking whimsically the while at the wounded giant from under the cover of her long lashes.

'No ; I suppose I couldn't, you stupid little muff,' laughed Joe. 'Well, call Mrs. Prior. No ; call Tom, there ; the horse must wait a bit.'

The man came shuffling in from the farmyard, and Joe told him to get some hot water and soap, wash his hands clean, then cut away the hair from a place where he was wounded—in an awkward spot, too, just above the temples—and strap the open wound up as tightly as he could with the plaister.

All this while winsome Mrs. Morton stood by, with anxiety depicted upon her face—heaven alone knows what in her heart—asking Joe to explain matters to her. Just at that

instant, however, he was busily chatting with the man upon a point concerning some work which the master had expected to be done, but which Tom explained he had had no time to attend to, inasmuch as he had only just finished rubbing down the ponies.

‘My wife’s ponies? Nonsense, man; why, she must have been home hours ago!’

‘No, Joe; I have been home barely an hour. But never mind that now; I insist upon knowing how you have got your poor head hurt. Don’t worry me so, dear,’ she pleadingly whimpered; ‘I’m not strong enough to bear it.’

Ah! how she fooled him!

‘Well, little woman, I came home down the Long Lane way, by the big field of swedes, and a parcel of gipsies, confound them! were encamped in the lane, and three or four of the vagabonds had got over the gate, and were hunting the swedes with a lurcher dog. Of course I wasn’t going to stand that—on my own land, too; so I put the horse at the hedge, and rode across to them. Then, one big fellow was a bit cheeky, and I jumped off, and before he knew what he was about I sent him sprawling on his back. Another of the cowards hit me with a knobbed stick, and for a minute I hardly knew what I was about; but they all bolted, the curs! because young Charley Brewer, who was close behind me, and tying his horse—he won’t jump, you know—to the gate, came across the field to my assistance. There’s the whole of the story. I’ll mark that fellow that hit me with the stick, though, before he’s twenty-four hours older. Thanks, Tom! that will do nicely; and, my pet,’ he con-

tinued, winding his arm round his wife's waist, 'whatever made you so late home ?'

'Well, I'll tell you, Joe ; and I'm very glad of it now, you dear old wounded fellow. I came home by the Long Lane way—not by the lane leading to the river, you know—and I saw those horrid gipsies, and somehow got nervous about them—why, I can't tell you. At any rate, I made up my mind that I would not go past them ; so I turned back, and it was such an awful long way round by the church, you know, that it made me late home as well. There ! that's all over. Now, come in to tea this moment, and then I'll light your pipe for you.'

Why blame him for pressing her to his broad, big-hearted bosom for a moment, anon kissing her soft blue eyes lovingly. Probably you or I, readers, being a brace of those special donkeys called men, would have done the same thing.





## CHAPTER XIX.

### A CONFERENCE AT THE BREAKFAST-TABLE.

NOTHING on the face of the earth affords greater scope for philosophic moralizing, and perhaps carking reflections, than the columns of a newspaper.

It is an infinite relief to turn from the sickening details of some horrible case of murder and deadly violence, to a graphically portrayed account of a noble and gallant act, thrilling to one's very marrow with the sublimity of its want of selfishness. One reads of some terrible deed, the outcome of the worst of erring human nature's debased passions, the result being a fit of shuddering horror, to think that civilized beings, created in a common mould, are balanced so imperfectly that the evil preponderates in such crushing measure over the good. Turn, however, but to the next page, the next column even, and the heroism of a crew of brave hearts, who pull forth from harbour in the teeth of a howling, shrieking tempest, facing giant billows, foam-crested, and tumbling upon an iron-bound coast, to save imperilled lives, straight fills one's mind, heart, and brain with a flood of delight to reflect that here noble pity and the very acme of noble courage are the characteristics of

others of our fellow-men. We admire the bravery of troops, standing shoulder to shoulder under a heavy fire, steady as rocks ; our enthusiasm rising so high that we seek to palliate the scenes of wild disorder, misery, and bloodshed that always follow in the footsteps of a conquering army when entering the country of a beaten enemy. None the less, however, do we find relief in turning to a reflex of the deeds of some simple hero, arrayed in a fustian jacket and a brass helmet, who, from a sense of duty alone, impelled by tender pity, goes straight into the jaws of a seeming death to succour a little child, who but for him would die, with no kindly hand near, within the walls of a burning house. So with scenes of humbler character, as detailed in these pages. We will forget the skeletons for a time, dismiss the ground where they have been unearthed in all their nakedness, and turn for a welcome spell of relief to scenes where the accessories are not at any rate tainted by the presence of a guilty woman.

October had shed its mellowing hues upon the summer leafage, and already the fresh vernal tints upon the elms and beeches in the park pertaining to the old Hall had given place to masses of foliage of a more sombre shade. These, when seen from a distance, and when the sun shone out, became a glorious mass of colour resplendent in deep crimson hues, umber and bright yellows, ochre and Indian red, relieved here and there by a patch of still vivid green. One of the first hoar-frosts, the advance-guard of the grim wintry battalions, had silvered the lawn in front of the windows of the morning-room at Alcaston with a carpet of tiny spangles. The breath of the chill night had woven patterns on the

crisp grass more delicate than the finest Maltese intricacies worked in silver jewellery, and which glittered in the rays of a blood-red sun, just topping a belt of distant firs. The great Lebanon cedars, the pride of the head-gardener, the drooping foliage of many a mountain-ash, with its store of scarlet-berried wealth, and the exquisite feathery foliage of scores of choice firs and evergreens, whose names matter little, alike glistened in the bright morning light with a legacy bequeathed by the frosty breathings of the past night.

Trim box hedges, where not a solitary sprig towered over its fellows, compassed the lawn on either hand, as though guarding its carefully-tended beds of choicest flowers, the latter, of course, shorn of their earlier summer beauty. At the extreme end of the expanse of turf, the eye took in, through a vista of laurels and dwarf shrubs of every variety, a slice of the wide-spread stretch of park, with its woods and plantations, anon the turret topping Tatham's domains, and the distant tower of the village church, whose chimes rang out musically the requiem of the dying hours.

Eight had just sounded with slow, distinct beats upon the frosty air, when the door of the breakfast-room was opened, and Welford entered, happy and radiant of face, healthy and ruddy of skin, from his recent 'rub down,' as he called it, in icy-cold water. He wore just such a look as a man should do when commencing the day; but then there are, perhaps, discontented mortals who will growl out, that if George Welford, prosperous, and the owner of good horses, guns, trout-fishing, a grand old home, and a woman whose heart was as of virgin gold, couldn't be happy, why, they would very much like to know who could.

A charming sanctum was this morning-room at the Hall, light, commodious, and airy, with paper on the walls of an indefinite arabesque pattern of palest grey, upon a ground of stone colour. The furniture was of maple wood, the walls hung with some delightful studies in water-colours—some of the clever French and German school—an early Turner or two, a lovely bit by the great master Constable, a group of hounds' heads in chalk, and one magnificent full-sized study of a bloodhound, the latter bearing the initials of that greatest of all modern animal painters, Edwin Landseer. A bright sea-coal fire burnt merrily, hissing and sputtering its jets of crimson flame up the wide-mouthed chimney, while the breakfast-table wore that charming *tout ensemble* afforded by snowy uncreased drapery, white fragile china, glittering tea-urn, and plate, the whole flanked by a grand round of beef, a pink-veined ham, a brown crusty loaf, fresh butter and cream, and sundry other good things which make one's breakfast-table a pleasant vision, and specially dear to English taste and custom.

Welford walked lazily across to one of the windows, and turning away after a brief, yet apparently satisfactory inspection of the clear expanse of grey frosty sky, he took up his morning paper, smelling damp, with a smack of the printer's ink still lingering in its folds, and spread the open sheet to the bright blaze, then turned at once to the 'Sporting Intelligence.' Sundry hums and ha's marked the passage of his eye down the list of horses for one or other of the later autumn handicaps, and then the door opening again, his wife entered, together with her friend Mary Dacre, both women charmingly attired in simple yet faultless morning robes. Mary

Welford never looked so well as when most carelessly dressed, and as she came forward now in a plain white cashmere, with equally plain lace trimmings—her eyes bright and fresh as the dew-drops, a pure, unsullied expression on every high-souled feature, her cheek tinged with rosy health, and a laughing smile on the curves of her ruddy lips—she looked the very flower of womanhood, sweet, honest, and true as the wild west wind or the first snowflakes on a high mountain.

She was making some merry reply to Miss Dacre as they entered, and George, rising instantly, went to greet them, ringing the bell at the same time.

‘Good-morning, Miss Dacre. Here’s a lovely, crisp outlook. Just see how delightful those fir-boughs look ! ’Pon my honour ! what with a vision of fair women inside and the frost-sprays out, I hardly know which most to admire.’

‘I know where your allegiance ought to be placed,’ laughed Mary Dacre, ‘whether it is or not. But come, Mary love, I’m dying—that is, I believe, the correct expression—for a cup of tea, so pray relieve my distress in anticipation of a possible catastrophe.’

Mrs. Welford smiled, and was about to make some remark, but at the entrance of a servant in morning livery, sat down quietly to the duty of pouring out tea, and as she leisurely stirred the sugar in her own cup, asked her husband at what time he expected his guests.

‘Well, Monckton may come at any time. Indeed, I half expected him to drop in to breakfast. Pugsby and the rest about ten ; but why ?’

‘Oh, I was only wondering whether you would lunch, or anything of that kind, before you start. I suppose not, how-



ever, if you go so early,' replied his wife. 'Is your tea nice, Mary?'

'Very, thanks. Do you know I wish,' said Miss Dacre, 'that the doctor had been here to breakfast; I think he's the very nicest man in Alcaston.'

'Extremely obliged,' laughed George; 'but permit me to assure you, Miss Dacre, that you haven't even an outside chance. Monckton is a hopeless subject; wouldn't even admire that lovely gown of yours. He's devoted solely and entirely to pills and trout-fishing.'

'How can you be so absurd, George?' chimed in Mary Welford. 'Oh, the shocking, deplorable state of ignorance that mankind lives in! Only fancy calling such a triumph of art as Mary's robe a gown!'

'Ten times worse to suggest that I have designs on the doctor's bachelorhood,' pouted Mary Dacre. 'What I meant was that I thought him a particularly honest and true-hearted gentleman.'

'Quite right, love. I endorse every word of your praise. A truer, simpler-hearted man than our good friend Monckton never lived,' asserted the mistress of the Hall. 'But you know, George's remark was quite like men in general. They have so many erratic thoughts of their own that they think the whole world follows on their special trail, doing likewise. Oh, I know their tricks and their manners perhaps nearly as well as the poor little dressmaker did. You were talking of allegiance just now. Did you notice our gallant hero—our special *preux chevalier*—and the eyes he made at a certain charming dame on the racecourse the other day?'

'Did I not, indeed!' said Mary Dacre, with a comic ex-

pression of horror. 'Who could help noticing it? Why it was dreadfully apparent—shocking, shocking!'

'Seems to me I've got in for a good thing,' mumbled George, with his mouth full of beef. 'To what charming dame might you specially allude, most worthy Daniel? There were so many pretty women there.'

'Well done, George! I thought your whole attention was centred on your betting-book. Why, *parole d'honneur*, I shall have to apply to the Divorce Court yet, I'm afraid,' cried his wife. 'Do you really mean to say you don't know?' she queried, with a roguish inclination of her superb head.

'Honour, Mary; I know of no one in particular, save yourself maybe, at whom I stared. Who was this transcendent being?'

'Why, Mrs. Morton, of course, you dreadful old humbug!'

'Well,' said George, slowly and reflectively, withal naïvely honest, 'she's uncommonly pretty, I'll admit.'

'She is more, George. She is simply the most beautiful woman I ever saw in my life. Mary agrees, too, upon that point. Yet, still there is something repellent about her. A *j'en ne sais quoi* kind of emotion fills me, that I cannot account for—that I am almost sorry for—for I fancy somehow she wants an honest friend.'

'Well, you are funny creatures, you women,' said George, at length. 'Here is a woman at whom, in one breath, you accuse me of making eyes—in other words, doing a bit of silent worshipping—in the next, you admit her peerless, and say that you think she wants a faithful friend, in such a tone that I verily believe you would yourself act the part of mentor, and go in for the guide, philosopher and friend

business from pure principle. After that, I give you up as a riddle which no man could unravel.'

'Don't be nonsensical, George. The accusation, as you please to dub it, was, as you know, pure banter. Thank goodness,' she added fondly, 'I know my husband, and my boy's father's heart to the very core. Women, I think, are subtler readers of their fellows than you imagine; and with the natural vanity of my sex, I suppose, I flatter myself that I can see through humanity fairly well. Now I have come to the conclusion—perhaps unjustly—that Mrs. Morton is not happy, and, more than that, does not love her husband.'

'But why come to such a conclusion, my love?' interpolated George hastily. 'I have never seen anything.'

'Of course not, you dear old stupid, and never would. You look to the surface, I below it. You see a smiling face, a row of pearly teeth—she has lovely teeth, Mary. I, however, peering down into the depths of the woman's mind, and watching the play of her face when her own heart and its teachings are her sole companions, see that in her eyes—in yours I dare say it would be simply an almost indefinite expression, but which nevertheless fairly makes me shudder.'

'Shudder, eh!' said matter-of-fact George. 'That's awful, I'll admit—puts one in mind of youthful experiences in the hands of one of those demoniacal hags in blue gowns at Margate or Brighton. Give me another cup of tea, love. Thanks! And now, frankly, Mary, what do you see?'

'If I tell you, you'll only laugh at me, so perhaps I had better keep my peerings into futurity to myself.'

'Laugh, no! I'll promise you not to do anything so

abominably rude. I hold that for a man to laugh at a woman who makes reflections which his own duller sense perhaps fails to appreciate, or for a woman to say unladylike, bitter things to a man, relying upon the fact that because he is a man she stands no chance of getting her nose pulled, are both of them examples of the extremes of ill-breeding. In the man's case, he is simply an uncouth boor, and in the lady's—well, in my opinion, she shows a very bad claim to the title.'

'I entirely agree, Mr. Welford,' assented Mary Dacre, 'save that in the case of the lady who may so far forget herself, I think the more probable reason for her doing so is that she is self-opinionated to such a degree, that she imagines her rudeness may pass current for an ebullition of genius.'

'Perhaps so; but I rather think we are travelling out of the record, Miss Mary. What I am anxious to get at is, what on earth my little woman can see that is terrible or awful in Mrs. Morton.'

'Nothing, Georgie darling, coming under either head, but I see a very great deal to be pitied. In the first place, I think she has married a man for whom she cares not one jot; and in the second, I see sometimes a far away, wistful look in her eyes, something like that in old Chance's when she hears your footstep, that somehow makes me fancy there is some one for whom she does care, but *behind the scenes*.'

'Rather an uncharitable conclusion, isn't it?' queried George drily. 'But there! I give you women up entirely. You are beyond me. Suppose, for a moment, however, Mary, that you are right, what then?'

'Well,' quietly replied Mary Welford, after an instant's re-

flection, 'I dare say it was a very silly notion ; but, pitying her from the bottom of my heart, as a woman without nice friends round her, without a good mother, even—for I cannot divest my mind of the conviction that, staunch chapel-goer as she is, Mrs. Ardron is anything but really good—I have formed the idea of calling upon her, and trying to gain her confidence.'

'A very good idea, too, Mary, amongst those who know you as Mary Dacre and I do. The world, however, would say it was both ill-judged and meddling with other people's business ; besides,' said he, rising, and gently clasping his wife's lovely face, upon which a slightly-pained expression sat, between his broad palms, 'unless I am a very bad judge, darling, if you did go, Mrs. Morton would snub you confoundedly when she had got at the pith of your visit ; and you'll kindly recollect,' said he fondly, 'that I absolutely reserve snubbing for my own special amusement. Come in !'

A servant entered directly, bearing a card upon a small silver salver, which bore the inscription, 'Captain Pugsby, The Hollies,' upon its polished surface.

'The captain 'ave gone into the library, sir.'

'Very well, William, I will be with him in a moment ;' and then, turning to the ladies, he added, 'You will see us before we go, I suppose ; or shall I say farewell for the present now ?'

'Oh, we shall wish you good sport in person, sir,' answered his wife, in playfully haughty tones. 'Such is our royal pleasure. Besides, how do you know that your cigar-case is filled ?'

‘Why, you don’t mean to say that you can’t trust him for that?’ laughed Mary Dacre. ‘I should have thought, now, that that was just one of those things a man would never forget—that, and “jumping powder,” don’t you call it?’

‘All right, fair dame; I’ll be even with you yet,’ growled George. ‘Wait until I see a fair chance, and then you’ll catch pepper.’

‘Forewarned, forearmed!’ cried the fair girl merrily, while at the same time George beat a retreat.

‘Ah, darling!’ she cried, as she wound her arm round Mrs. Welford’s shoulders, ‘you are a happy woman in your husband, at any rate. His heart is as true as steel, and his sense of honour pure as a diamond. Moreover, he is as perfectly right in his estimate of Mrs. Morton’s character as right can be—of that I am convinced.’

‘May be so, Mary. I am afraid, perhaps, that he is. Yet I should none the less like the opportunity, and if it came should fearlessly avail myself of it—at any rate in making an attempt to gain her confidence, and, if possible, warn her of a pitfall that she appears to be blindly walking into.’

‘Forget it, love. It is anything but a pleasant subject; and besides, as George says, you may be wrong, after all, in your surmise.’

‘Well, let us hope so. How that man has spoilt my arrangements in hair! I must brush it out again. Come with me, and then we’ll see if your favourite and mine, the doctor, has made his appearance yet.’



## CHAPTER XX.

### IN THE LIBRARY.

‘HA! Captain Pugsby, very glad to see you. So you’re first, after all?’

‘No offence—ha—I presume, in that, Mr. Welford?’

‘Offence, my dear fellow! No, of course not. I am very glad to welcome you. Only, my wife, Miss Dacre, and I—you know Mary Dacre, I think? Yes. Well, we were all chatting over breakfast, and the women were making Monckton favourite—I mean in the order of arrival.’

‘Ha! I see. But I don’t take you quite. Pray—ha—who is Monckton?’

‘Not know him! Lucky fellow! A gentleman, of course, and our doctor. A great favourite of my wife’s—indeed, everybody’s I think. You’ve breakfasted already, no doubt? That’s all right; and now what shall I get you—sherry? No; soda and brandy? Good.’

Ring the bell, a man-servant speedily placed a tall glass of the captain’s favourite morning beverage before him. He was a sallow-faced little man—an old Indian officer with a badly-deranged liver, a shocking boaster, and a teller of

interminably long stories. A heavy, gross feeder, he was yet a better drinker, a fact which he proved by speedily emptying the tumbler, with an appreciative smack of his thin lips, daintily wiping his moustache afterwards with a spotless cambric handkerchief.

‘By-the-bye, how did you come?’ asked Welford. ‘I was in such a hurry the other day on the racecourse, and perhaps somewhat elated with success into the bargain, that I am afraid I made my arrangements badly. I ought to have sent the dogcart for you.’

‘Ha—many thanks—ha. But—er—fact is, I intended walking. Don’t get half exercise enough—bad digestion, torpid liver, horrible dreams o’ nights, and so on. Now, when I was at Bumbernag Fort, you know, and all that kind of thing, thought nothing of hanging a couple of dozen natives—Thuggees and infernal damn thieves, sir, all the lot of ’em—and then killing a couple of hyænas afterwards before breakfast. Fact! Two more niggers, sir, before tiffin. Ha—by gum, sir, that was life if you like! I had the best Shekor elephant in India—ha. Pardon me going off at a tangent—old memories and confounded recollections—ha—and I forget. Where was I originally—ha? Oh, walking over, of course; and in fact, Lascelles—infernal starchy fellah, sir—picked me up. Talk of the devil,’ he added, in an undertone, ‘and here he is.’

At the same instant, Colonel Lascelles, a fine, soldierly man, upright as a dart, a man with a handsome open face, yet stern, determined air, entered the room. An officer and a gentleman, from the crown of his grey head to the sole of his small, well-shaped foot, but still a man who was not



generally liked on account of his excessive hauteur, scornful, somewhat domineering tone, and fiery temper.

‘Good-morning, Welford’—‘Good-morning, colonel, very glad to see you,’ were the mutual salutations; and then the colonel sat down, and, taking up a soda-water bottle, prepared to break the wire.

‘Hold hard, colonel; I’ll ring for the footman,’ said George hastily.

‘Ring! In the name of heaven why, when one can do it one’s self ten times better? Unless your man’s a treasure, and then I envy you, he will spill half the contents, and spoil the whole thing by putting too much brandy in. *Au contraire*, I please myself to a tittle; and pleasing myself, please everybody.’

‘Exactly—ha—unless you leave everybody else’s glass empty,’ said Pugsby cheerfully, pushing his own tumbler across the table.

‘I’ faith, not I—Dick Lascelles is nobody’s drawer but his own—mix for yourself, my friend.’

‘Ha!’ said the captain, rising, ‘when I was at Budgerigar, begad, sir——’

‘I know all about it,’ interrupted Lascelles, laughing grimly—‘healths to everybody!—you hanged every cussed nigger on the establishment, slaughtered every tiger within fifty miles of the place, and ruined every woman who’d let you, eh? What are we waiting for, Welford?’

‘Only Monckton. He is so much behind time, however, that I think we had better go on. Captain Pugsby, come and choose your gun; you, Lascelles, I presume, have brought your own,’

‘Yes. It’s nothing very crack, but light and handy, and I generally get on better with it than with a strange weapon.’

‘I was about to observe—ha,’ began the captain again impressively, ‘that when I was at Budgerigar——’

‘You had a gun,’ said the colonel solemnly. ‘Elephant gun—nine drachms of powder and explosive ball. Certainly; and you once, using a heavy solid bullet, sent it clean through the skulls of forty-five elephants, standing in a row under some peepul trees, and bagged the lot! I know, sir—we all know, sir—and like a huge chorus of Dominie Sampsons, the world says, “Pro-di-gi-ous!”’

‘I can’t help thinking,’ observed the captain, with an air of stern resolve, ‘that—ha—it is very rude to interrupt a man when he is about to launch into anecdote, Colonel Lascelles; moreover it spoils the effect. You’ll—ha—pardon me, I know. It was not forty-five elephants. There were three only, and the biggest bull——’

‘Had tusks as long as the Monument, I do assure you, Welford. By gad! sir, you’re launching into anecdote so everlastingly and infernally, all the year round, that I wonder you don’t build some anecdotal docks, and then you could float ’em, sir, and swim in ’em, and—ah—sink in ’em, and rid the country of ’em. They’re an infernal noosance, sir, are those old hulks of anecdotes of yours, and I don’t like ’em. Now that’s plain English.’

‘You fellows will get to quarrelling presently, I can see,’ said Welford at last, although he could hardly prevent an explosion of hearty laughter at the figure the captain cut at the tail of Lascelles’s scornful remonstrance. An utter

coward and boaster, he curled up like a leaf before a hot fire, and sat as close within the shell of silent reserve as an oyster. At this moment the door opened, and Monckton, fussy as usual, and brimful of excitement, bustled in with evident haste.

‘Well, doctor, how are you, and what’s the matter?’ cried Welford. ‘Nothing wrong, I hope?’

‘Matter, wrong! Well, murder’s the matter—that’s about the size of it. That abominable idiot of mine—young Burrows—gave poor Elsie Noot—keeps the circulating library close to my surgery, colonel—enough tartar emetic last night to have poisoned a black man, and I’ve been up with the poor soul half the night with the stomach-pump. Oh, better? Yes, she’s all right now. Last week he nearly settled a baby—laudanum instead of peppermint cordial, or some other infernal mistake. So he tramps to-day, bag and baggage—I’ll have no more of him.’

‘Reminds me—ha,’ exclaimed a voice in feeble tones—‘Dr. Monckton I presume?—my name is Pugsby, of the Hollies—Captain Pugsby, at your service—that when I was Commissioner at Luck——’

‘Come and kill a cock, Welford—come and slaughter something!’ cried Lascelles, in fierce dudgeon, rising and going straight out of the room—‘or, by Jove, I shall emulate one of those Malay gentlemen, and run amuck here!’ ‘Pon my soul, the fellow’s outrageous! What are you going to do, Welford—drive or walk?’

‘Oh! no battue business for me, thank you—I shoot for sport, not slaughter. No tame birds for me, who come to a whistle to be fed.’

‘Then, for heaven’s sake,’ cried the colonel, with energetic warmth, ‘put that miserable man where I cannot by any possibility mistake him for a parrot. He’s in a grey suit as it is—I’m horribly near-sighted, you know, and if the beggar only pulls out a red pocket-handkerchief, to a dead certainty I shall mistake him for one of those beastly talking parrots, and blaze away. By-the-bye, I owe you a hundred ; there’s a cheque for the money.’

‘All right, Lascelles—thanks. You walk with me, then, and I’ll shunt the captain into the doctor’s custody. He’s a horrible bore, I admit.’

‘Bore, my dear fellow !—he’s the concentrated essence of forty thousand bores. What on earth made you ask him to come ?’

‘Well, you know, his daughters visit my wife— Hush ! here she is ! Miss Dacre, Colonel Lascelles ; Lascelles, Miss Mary Dacre—the best girl in England, bar one. Mary, love, we shall be back at five punctually. Dinner at six, I suppose. Your wife is coming, colonel ?’

‘I *presume so*,’ drawled the gallant officer, in so different a tone to his usual stern, haughty manner, that Mary Welford looked up to his face quickly and inquisitively.

‘For shame, colonel !’ she cried at length, in low, laughing accents ; ‘that is almost equivalent to saying that you would enjoy your dinner more if she were not.’

‘Perhaps so,’ retorted Lascelles. ‘I hold that the value to be placed upon Mrs. Colonel Lascelles, considered as a work of art, when dressed, and fresh from the hands of her maid, is almost incalculable. By the same process of reasoning, however, I find that my digestive organs work in

better form when distance lends the thingamy—whatever it may be—to the view ; or, better still—by Jove !—when the view is a mere question of remembrance.’

‘Oh ! colonel, colonel ! I’m ashamed of you. Whatever would your fate be if I were to disenchant your wife upon the score of your devotedness ?’

‘Probably, madam,’ he answered, with a grim smile, ‘I should have to emulate the example of the celebrated individual mentioned in Holy Writ, and take up my bed and walk elsewhere : or, failing that, should have to imagine myself the dusky Moor, and my dear superior moiety the divine Desdemona. ’Fore gad, I wish she was !’

‘Abominable, colonel !’ laughed Mary. ‘You get worse and worse. Come, Miss Dacre, let us go and find Dr. Monckton. Don’t be late, George, love, or the cook will be having a fit, or something equally dreadful. Good-bye, and any quantity of good sport !’ and shaking her head at the terrible old colonel with a threatening expression, charming Mary linked her arm within her friend’s and quietly walked to the library door.

‘Doctor !’ she cried, peeping into the room, wherein she saw Monckton tightly button-holed by the Indian officer, ‘George and the colonel are just upon the point of starting. Very well indeed, thanks, captain,’ she added, in reply to a query from that gallant officer touching the state of her bodily health. ‘But indeed you must make haste, or they will be gone.’

‘Come, then, captain, and get your gun ! I have my own old weapon,’ said Monckton, who led the way at once to the gun-room.

The captain, by no means a bad shot, soon had a gun selected from George's stock which fitted him uncommonly well. He next proceeded to fill his pocket with cartridges, whilst Monckton, taking his own gun from the case, turned to the two ladies, and, both men raising their hats, they joined George and the colonel directly afterwards upon the lawn.





## CHAPTER XXI.

### A SMACK AT THE LONGTAILS.

‘WHAT’s the betting, captain, on your killing the first starling that comes out of the ivy?’ cried Lascelles, addressing the thrice-unhappy Pugsby—unhappy because he was burning to wipe out in some way or other the sting left by the fiery colonel’s recent attack in the library.

‘What—ha—ivy do you refer to?’ he drawled, somewhat superciliously.

‘Why, that wonderful crop growing on the side of the house, there,’ said the colonel briefly. ‘There are any quantity of birds flying backwards and forwards. See! here come two, right over your head. A level sovereign you don’t kill the leading bird with your first barrel; three to one against the brace.’

‘Five I’ll take—£5 to £1.’

‘Done! It’s a bet.’

Both birds were a good deal too high for a certainty, and clean over Pugsby’s head. Altogether it looked as though the colonel would pocket the sovereign. Throwing up his gun quickly, however, he shot a long way in advance of both, and at the double report both birds fell to the ground,

the first dead as a stone, the second winged and otherwise badly hit.

‘You are a better shot than I thought you were, Pugsby,’ said the colonel heartily, as he walked across to pick the birds up. ‘I never saw a bird cleaner killed than the first; and the second,’ he added, as he mercifully put the poor thing out of its misery, ‘has had its gruel. I will owe you a “fiver.”’

So elated was the captain, that, striking an attitude and forgetting all about a previously solemnly-made resolution, he commenced: ‘Ha! my dear colonel, when I was at Lucknow——’ until, catching the expression of the senior officer’s eye glaring upon him coldly, and hearing George laugh out merrily, he stopped with a horrified expression, as though he had been shot.

‘Pon my honour—ha—association of old ideas, and—ha—so on, are constantly cropping up,’ he muttered, half apologetically.

‘Yes; that’s it,’ said George, rather feeling for the snubbing the little man had had. ‘Well, now, come along. Here is Miller with the spaniels, so that we will push onwards.’

Directly afterwards Miller, the head-keeper, with an assistant, came on the scene. He had a charming team of spaniels—short-legged, powerful dogs, and wonderfully high-couraged—together with one steady old retriever, frisking and frolicking round his heels.

‘Fine morning, Miller,’ said George, as the man came up.

‘Very, indeed, sir. Down, Diver! back, Belle! They’re as wild as hawks with short work, genelman. They’ll soon



steady down, though. Steady there, Diver ! Crack, crack ! sounded his short dog-whip, a terrible punisher in his hands. 'And now, which will you shoot first, sir ? Home Coppice ha' got plenty o' birds, and I'm nearly sartin as there's a cock or two in it.'

'Very well, Miller ; then we'll shoot the Home Coppice first. Lascelles, suppose you and I shoot the left-hand rides, taking the under-keeper with us, while Monckton, Miller, and the captain operate to the right. Eh ? The dogs will work it well between them. Spare as many hen birds as you can,' he added, with a cheery smile, 'for the sake of next year.'

Then away they went, making straight across the crisp, frost-bitten turf, towards a thick wood of larch, birch, and towering graceful firs, together with many a sturdy, giant-limbed oak, under which the pheasants found store of acorns, as the wind rattled them down from their yellow cups, and where, as the keeper said, he thought they might find a cock or two.

A glorious bit of wood, solemnly still and shady, where ferns grew rankly luxuriant in the damp, moist soil, until they attained a height nearly equal to a man's shoulder ; a wood where the larger trees had a delightfully beautiful tracery of the palest emerald-coloured ivy, winding its graceful tendrils in tangled confusion round their massive and wide-spreading roots ; a wood where, in the tender spring-time, the earliest primrose bloomed, and a forest of harebells nodded to the soft breezes that swept through the ferns, or played hide-and-seek round the great trunks of the trees.

They skirted the short oak palings, green and grey with a growth of mossy surface, mingled with the commoner lichens, until they got to a quaintly-built stile, set in the woodwork at the top end of the coppice. As they walked along the ditch at the foot of the sloping bank upon which the fence was built, many a rabbit, disturbed at his breakfast amongst the tender blades of grass growing at the roots of the blackberry branches, bustled up. Scuttering quick as lightning, and with pricked ears held aloft, up the bank, giving a startled backward glance from his soft brown eyes at the band of intruders ere he vanished through a hole in the battered, time-worn fence, the little rodent went flying, like nothing so much as a frightened rabbit, into the safer intricacies of the wood.

Once Belle, a young and impulsive red and white beauty, gave tongue vehemently as a bunny jumped up under her very nose, dashing after her game through the ferns, for which brace of accomplishments she caught two hearty strokes from Miller's whip—hard, heavy strokes, well laid on—causing the young lady to whimper badly, but which doubtless did her a world of good.

'You don't use the whip much, Miller?' queried the colonel, after he had seen the performance.

'No, sir; but when I do they knows it, depend upon it. Knockin' a dog about's not a bit o' good. Only sours him in time and turns him sulky. Two or three hard cuts at the right time is worth a lot o' off and on thrashings!'

'Yes, I quite agree with you. Just hold my gun while I get over the stile, will you? I'm not quite so nimble as I was ten years ago.'

In another minute the party of men stood within the confines of the ring fence ; the keeper proposing that while his master worked three of the spaniels, together with the retriever, from his side of the cover, he himself would take Duchess and Diver, the best of the team for retrieving purposes, and work them on the other.

‘Admirable!’ rejoined George. ‘They range very wide, and as it is not a big wood it will do very well.’

‘Haven’t had a gun in my hand for years,’ said Lascelles coolly, quietly slipping the cartridges into his breechloader. ‘I expect I shall make a rare mess of it. Pretty stiff cover this, Welford.’

‘Yes ; but all right for walking as we get farther in. Come along, colonel. Hie in, dogs ! hie in !’

In an instant the spaniels bounded into the midst of the stiff, thick cover, at one moment showing their sterns, waving with keen anxiety in their quest for feather, above the ferns and bramble ; at the next they were entirely lost to sight as they forced their way bodily underneath the thick, thorny growth of underwood.

‘Down this ride, colonel. Now, you take the left-hand birds, I those to the right,’ said George, speaking in low, eager tones, while, at the next instant, a chorus of music proclaimed that game of some kind was on foot.

‘It’s a hare or a rabbit, sir, I think,’ said Boyce, the under-keeper ; ‘they’d ha’ flushed a pheasant before now.’

Even as he spoke, a big hare, with erect ears, bounced out from the cover, and, catching sight of the men, turned sharp round, scuttling down the narrow ride with all sail set. George put up his weapon, his left leg stiffened like a bar of

iron, and out rattled the sharp, quick clang, denoting the discharge of his right-hand barrel. It was all up with poor puss. Uttering a sharp, wailing scream, almost like the utterance of a distressed child, she bounded high in the air, and fell, stone-dead.

‘Mark cock!’ cried the keeper hurriedly, on the instant that George’s shot rang out.

Welford looked all round, and caught momentary sight of the bonnie brown bird, winging his still, ghostlike flight between the oaks. Bang! Out rattled the left-hand barrel, the shot cutting the foliage from the lower boughs in its passage, and causing a little leafy shower of tribute to fall to the chaste Diana.

‘Is he down?’ cried George excitedly. ‘I was bang on him, I’m certain.’

‘Missed him, my dear fellow—missed him clean as a whistle,’ replied the colonel, with an odd twinkle in his eye. ‘I saw him go right away.’

‘Well, that’s funny, anyhow. It was a longish shot, I’ll admit; and yet I fancy I was clean on him. Here, Bruce!’ he cried, speaking to the grand old retriever, a dog who never budged an inch from heel until he was told to go. ‘Hi, lad! go seek!—Look out, Lascelles, your side! That’s old Busy’s voice—she’s after something. By Jove! what a splendid shot!’

It certainly was a grand chance, for a cock pheasant flew up like a sky-rocket, his richly-bronzed neck gleaming like a jewel in the bright morning light, and pelting clean through the oaks with a rush and a loud metallic sort of whirr from his strong, muscular pinions. Before the colonel got his gun

up he was lost amid the boughs, and then topping the trees, he soared straight away in full view over the tops of the larches at a tremendous pace.

When Lascelles did get on, and pulled trigger, the bird was a mile out of reach, continuing his flight as though no such things as Curtis and Harvey and No. 5 shot were in existence.

‘Hardly quick enough, old fellow!’ said George, smiling.

At this moment Bruce trotted up to them with the woodcock held daintily in his jaws.

‘Doesn’t look much like a miss, does it?’ he continued, taking the bird from the intelligent dog’s mouth, still alive, and with hardly a feather of its gloriously mottled plumage ruffled, so tender had the old dog been over his work.

A volley of echoing shots resounded through the trees from the other side of the wood—four barrels in all—which told pretty clearly that a little bunch of birds had been flushed. Boyce stood shading his eyes with his hands, and looking through the trees in the direction of the sound, Turning, he said suddenly, ‘Pheasant coming—cock bird. sir—clean over your head!’

Lascelles saw him directly, and stood ready for a shot. Over the tree-tops came the bird, with the speed of an express engine, the wind behind him into the bargain, so that he wanted a bit of killing. This time the colonel was equal to the emergency, and shooting six feet ahead of his game, crumpled him up, dead as a stone. The bird fell a heap of glossy plumage, the feathers flying in all directions, while, swiftly falling from a great height, it tumbled, head first, with an audible thump, amongst the tall fern and bracken.

‘Bravo, colonel! That’s a clipping good gun of yours. A rattling long shot, and splendidly killed,’ cried George enthusiastically.

‘Yes, the gun’s all right when the powder’s straight,’ said the colonel, with a grim smile. ‘I’m bound to add that it’s a bit crooked sometimes. By Jove! another cock bird!’ and up went his gun half-way to his shoulder.

‘Hen bird, colonel,’ said Boyce quickly, a remark which accounted for the gallant officer quietly lowering his weapon, while he availed himself of the opportunity given by cramming another cartridge into the recently exploded right-hand barrel.

Just at this moment they were approaching a somewhat open patch of the wood, where a little mite of a stream—a mere thread of water—trickled down from a higher ridge of the land. It moistened the roots of some great beeches, resplendent in their copper-coloured foliage, while it ran tinkling amongst rough boulders and lumps of chalky stone, anon peeping out like a shy-faced child, and then hiding itself again amongst great clumps of laurel and arbutus.

‘Look out for a cock here, gentlemen,’ said Boyce in low tones, as they approached the open. ‘They a’most always lies here, they does.’ Busy at this moment pushed her intelligent lemon and white head out from the more clearly defined belt of ferns and bramble, and then, obedient to a wave of Boyce’s hand, wriggled her body through. She was followed directly afterwards by Belle, both dogs holding up their heads, and watching every movement of Boyce’s up-raised hands. A quickly-repeated yelp, yelp from the third spaniel, who was still in covert, caused Busy and Belle to

prick their ears and perhaps waver for a second's space in their cautious creep up to the keeper. Directly afterwards their late companion dashed out just behind them in full chase of a hare, pulling up instantly, however, at Boyce's rate; but it was just on the cards that Belle, forgetting her late castigation, would have joined issue, had she not caught the low, reproving tones of the keeper's voice.

That was quite enough, and all three dogs came quietly up—poor old Belle with a sorrowful never-do-it-no-more expression in her eyes which caused George—tender-hearted as a child—to lay his hand on her broad-skulled handsome head, with a kindly touch that altered the look in an instant.

‘Take the left hand, Lascelles! Steady, Belle—back, Bonny!—Yah, you bad dog! Come, in with you! Now look out, old man! Hie in! Look up, dogs!’

In amongst the laurels they dashed, and could not have gone ten yards amongst their tangled intricacies before a soft rustling beat of wings was heard, and in a second afterwards, with a sidelong, stealthy flip, flip of their handsome mottled pinions, a brace of cock rose on Welford's side, presenting a clear good shot as they flushed over the open. Up went his gun, a bright flash shining along the barrels as the sunlight glinted on the metal; a second's space followed, and then the fatal bang! bang! of both barrels woke up the echoes of the glade, one bird falling, a little tumbled heap, and clear in view, while the other fluttered, broken-winged, into a clump of high fern.

Bruce had been watching the gun, and, as he saw the bird fall, whimpered with joyous expectation. ‘Hie on, old man!’ said George, and, with wondrous instinct, the dog, turning

his head, passed the dead as though he could make sure of that presently, and plunged with a dash, that broke the tall fronds in all directions, straight for the spot where the wounded bird had fallen. After a minute's quiet hunting, out he came, the winged bird held tenderly in his jaws, and up to his master at a gallop. Then away he went again, and brought the dead bird in from where it lay, full in view upon a little grassy mound.

A shot rang out at close quarters, and evidently from the doctor's party, so that, looking quickly up, Boyce was just in time to see a bird towering, evidently shot through the head, while Monckton and Pugsby, followed by Miller, came into view directly afterwards on the other side of the open.

George hailed them, and they came across at once. No sooner were they within speaking-distance than the doctor instantly entered into enthusiastic praise of his companion's shooting, saying that he had never been out with so brilliant a shot in his life before. Miller backed him up in his own fashion, so that the captain's sallow cheek flushed, and it was evident, by a passing allusion to some experiences with big game in India, that he had quite forgotten the damper of the morning. Everything went merry as a marriage-bell from that moment, for, curiously enough, not a man had thought of refreshment in any shape, save the captain himself. That very good general producing a big wicker-covered flask, it was found to contain some very curiously dry and excellent sherry, the owner of which declared in very round terms that it had come from the cellar of his very particular friend the Rajah of Bugdum-pore. Straightway Lascelles drank to the Rajah's very good health, together



with more power to the captain's elbow for being such a trump as to bring a full flask with him.

'Never go out without—ha—thinking—of the commissariat,' said Pugsby, in a pleased voice, and with no small sense of importance.

'Very good judge, too,' cried jolly old George, laughing. 'Now, just one cigar, and then we'll shoot the big wood, or as much as we can of it, before dinner.'

Suppose we leave them over their weeds, and see how some other folks are progressing.





## CHAPTER XXII.

### PLAYING A FRIENDLY GAME.

JOE MORTON thought he had never loved his winsome, bonnie wife so much as upon that night when she led him, like a great noodle as he was, into the comfortable, old-fashioned parlour, pushed him gently down into his comfortable, old-fashioned, roomy chair, and placed a soft pillow for his wounded head. He had never seen her to such advantage for one thing, for her charming blue eyes were aflame with the light of love. Her lips, ruddy and sweet as a ripened peach on a southern wall, were yet tingling with Hubert's hot kisses. Her heart, bounding with anticipation of further triumphs of the delights of a fresh banquet upon stolen fruit, beat so high that it made her fair, voluptuously-rounded bosom throb impetuously until her face blazed again with the violence of her excited emotions. Joe, of course, knew nothing of all this. That is where the exquisite fun of the thing lay. He mistook the rosy flush mantling her beautiful face for the flush of anxiety on his account. Miserable idiot ! He converted the ardent heavings of her bosom, as she flitted about the room and put first one little delicacy upon the tea-table and then another, into possibly repentant emotion for coldness and want of affection shown to her poor

suffering Joe. Insensate ass ! Could he have read the woman's heart he would have known that she, falling down upon her knees, would have impiously thanked her Maker, had the gipsy's stick stretched him stark and a stiffening corpse upon his broad back in the bean-field. If she had known that his face was turned up, dead and pale, staring with lack-lustre eyes at the yellowing evening sky, seeing not the swifts as they hawked in the ambient air, nor feeling the night-dews as they fell in charity, giving his death-stricken features an equal share of their friendly moisture with the weeds and the pink blossoming clover, she would have said 'Thank God !' and meant it.

He did not know it. Unless he had been a seer he could not possibly have done so ; and as he sat there, happy, although with an aching head, watching the lithe, elegant figure of his wife flitting about, now in deep shadow, now with her exquisite profile shown clear in the broad firelight, and following her every movement with dumb, loving eyes — 'Fore gad !' as the colonel would have said, 'it was all exquisitely funny.'

To people who are fond of high contrasted lights here is a charming picture. The man, rugged somewhat, a trifle uncouth may be, but true as steel itself, would have spilt the last drop of his life-blood for the woman whom he loved. The wife, graceful as a fern-spray, lovely as God could possibly mould her, was the embodiment of treachery, the very incarnation of devilish deceit, with a heart whose cruel cunning would have wrecked an army of brave men ruthlessly, and laughed at the torn and battered hulls.

'Poor old Joe !' she said, in soft, melodious accents, as she

knelt in the full blaze of the bright firelight, with a slice of bread in her white taper fingers ; ‘ I’m going to make you a lovely bit of crisp brown toast, and, mind, you’ll have to eat it.’ And she said it with so charming an air of coquetry, that the idiot literally idolized her. So she made the toast, spread a dainty flake of butter on it, poured him out a cup of fragrant tea, brought it to him as he sat by the fire—she would on no account let her suffering, wounded husband get up from his cosy chair—stirred the sugar in his cup, and, kneeling close to his great uncouth, powerful limbs, held his plate while he ate and drank.

The firelight glittered on the golden-brown threads in her hair ; her blue eyes looked luminously deep and full of pitying love ; the soft brown lashes shaded the full melting orbs, like tender sprays of fern masking the mouth of a deep well. As the eyes dropped under Joe’s honest, loving stare, the silky lashes shed a faintly-defined ridge of shadow upon the fair peachy-hued cheek. Never had she looked so lovely. Never had her husband’s bosom glowed with a fire so ardent and yet so holy. No baleful passion usurped his breast. His was a love pure, true, and tender as his grand, big heart could fashion it. He pictured himself—stupidly enough, of course—a rough, rugged oak, gnarly and grimy, and she a tiny, graceful flower, nestling in a cleft at the roots. He took himself to task, therefore, and thought what would happen to the flower if the Great Woodman came that way some fine morning and fancied felling that particular oak ? His reproving conscience told him that he had never yet made provision for his wife in the event of his death, and that, said he to himself, should be the first duty to-morrow.

For, come what would, he vowed the flower should never feel the bleakness of a winter wind while he could help it. Ah, poor Joe ! he loved his wife too well. A fatal passion usually, when a man is fool enough to love a woman more than he does his God. There are many fools, nevertheless.

And she, what was she thinking about, as she knelt at her husband's feet, and watched a gathering moisture, the dews of a full heart, spread over his honest, straightforward eyes ? Well, candour compels one to admit that she was thinking how to play the first move in that little friendly game she meant presently to take a part in on the bridge.

'Thanks, my darling !' said Joe presently, when he had finished the last drop of his tea ; 'that has done me a world of good. Kiss me, sweetheart, baby wife of mine—God alone knows how dearly I love thee, Lizzie !'

She stooped over him, and gently kissed his broad, comely forehead. She settled the downy pillow comfortably, and laid her soft, pinky cheek—almost like a flake of apple-blossom—upon his own, swart, ruddy, and tanned with the sun. Her fragrant breath fanned his face and filled his nostrils with its subtle sweetness. Joe's heart beat high with love, hope, and a sense of overpowering happiness, and his strong arm stole gently round her yielding frame. She put her soft, fair arms round his neck, and after giving him a little tiny squeeze, which straightway sent a tremor running through his big, burly body from head to heel, she played the first move in the friendly game.

'I suppose you won't attempt whist to-night, poor old fellow ?' she asked, while her soft hand stole up and nestled close to his face.

‘Yes, I hope so, pet. I should miss my game sadly. Besides, the others are sure to come, expecting their usual evening, and my head does not ache half so badly now.’

‘Who is coming?’ she asked presently. ‘Father, and Miller, I suppose?’ (Miller, you will recollect, is the head-keeper.) ‘And who else?’

‘Your father said he should bring old Bridgeman with him—the schoolmaster, you know. I haven’t the smallest idea whether he can play; but I expect he can, or else your father would not suggest his coming. Very steady player is your father—very steady,’ said Joe, slowly and reflectively.

‘Oh, it’s awful, Joe,’ she pleaded in a whisper; ‘I do so dread whist nights. There’s old Miller sits bolt upright in his chair, his cards spread out and held like a fan, with about a million wrinkles in his face. Then there’s my father, snapping and growling at everybody the whole evening. Every five minutes it is, “There, you’ve trumped my best heart;” and all the while you look on like an amiable old bear, and beam. I do *wish*, Joe, you wouldn’t beam,’ she half-snapped, for one second. Then, upon reflection, she said in laughing fashion, ‘Upon my word, your face puts one in mind, darling, of a great big sun.’

‘Better to beam than bully, isn’t it, Lizzie?’ he asked, half-apologetically for ever having been guilty of so heinous a crime.

‘Oh, of course; but then you couldn’t bully if you tried. You’re not equal to it, Joe. By-the-bye’—(move No 2 in the friendly game)—‘have you heard that poor old Mrs. Wagstaffe is dangerously ill?’

‘Ill? No, my dear; who told you so?’

‘Her son. He’s at work on the Uplands Farm, and passes here every day. A terrible thing, Joe darling, for that poor, lonely woman to lie ill all day, without seeing a soul save old Monckton when he comes round ! Shocking ! Do you know, you dear old fellow !’ she said impetuously, and very confidentially, ‘while you are playing whist to-night I’ll pack up a little tiny basket with some tea and butter—there’s a little jelly left, too, and some cold fowl—and I’ll take it round to Mrs. Wagstaffe. How pleased the poor soul will be ! Why, it’s quite like a play—“ Lady Bountiful (her first appearance), Mrs. Lizzie Morton !” ’

Joe smiled at his fair wife’s enthusiasm, but ventured to ask her if she did not think it would be better to put off her visit till the morning.

‘I will, of course, if you like, dear,’ she said submissively. ‘But it promises to be a lovely evening—the moon is rising, and you don’t know what a relief it would be to me to get out of the whist-playing for an hour or so. Say I may go, Joe !’ and, suddenly raising her head, she put her rosy-ripe lips downwards, and, playing her ace, fairly kissed him on the mouth.

That was a settler. What could he say after that ? Simply nothing : so that, with the best grace in the world, although he hated her going out alone after dark, he said quietly, ‘Very well, love ; go then, in God’s name !’

Five minutes afterwards Jabez Ardron stalked into the room with a slightly unsteady gait, followed by Bridgeman, the village schoolmaster, a heavy, dark-featured man, slow in manner and speech, excessively polite, and somewhat bombastical.

Mrs. Morton got up from her place at Joe's knee to receive her father.

'Humph !' said he sarcastically. 'No lights, eh?—I'd ha' thought now as you had gotten over spooning by this time, my girl.'

'We were not altogether spooning, father, as you elegantly dub it. Joe has had a nasty blow from a gipsy's stick, and his head ached badly. It is much better now, though, so that I'll light the lamp. This is Mr. Bridgeman, I suppose ?'

'Madam,' cried Bridgeman in a sonorous bass, 'your surmise is perfectly correct—I have the supreme happiness of making your acquaintance, and that of your worthy husband. Your servant, sir ; and will you permit me to say that vinegar and brown paper, frequently applied, are invaluable in the case of bruises or contusions of the epidermis—in short, the skin——'

'Thank you very much, Mr. Bridgeman ; pray be seated. Ardron, take the easy-chair, there. I am glad to say there is nothing very serious the matter. I had a squabble with some gipsies, and got a rap on the head for my pains. Now, what will you have ?'

This question was addressed equally to both, his father-in-law settling the matter very quickly on his own account by saying, 'Gin warm !' a bumper of which exhilarating fluid was presently put close to his elbow by his very loving daughter. The worthy schoolmaster opined that if there was one species of tippie more pernicious than another, sapping one's brain-pan and destroying the vigour of one's constitution, it was 'gin warm.' 'No, sir,' said he, holding his chin reflectively with one hand, and addressing Joe. 'Gin, warm,



may, and doubtless does, suit a certain section of the community who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow rather than by the exercise of the glorious gift of intellect. To me it would be equivalent to poison. The juice of the glorious bine, sir—the hop, the pride of the Kentish valleys—in conjunction with malt, and its secret properties ; in short, beer is the only beverage I permit myself.’

‘Well, sir, at the risk of sapping my brain-pan——’ commenced Joe.

‘It would take a lot of sapping, I think,’ growled Ardron. ‘But, howsomever, I shall have the pleasure to drink this company’s very good health.’

‘Ah!’ he concluded, after half-emptying his tumbler. ‘Now, that seems to add vigour to my constitution. Sing’ler, ain’t it? And, as for pernicious, I only feels pernicious-like when my very worthy better-half comes home from a tea-meeting. ‘Tea-meetings reg’larly attended will develop more perniciosity—that’s a very fine word, eh?—than all the gin warm that ever was brewed!’

‘Ah! I quite forgot mother,’ said Mrs. Morton, as she drew her chair closer to the little circle. ‘How is she, father?’

‘My dear, she gets worse and worse! She swears the world’s a-coming to a hend, and what with neuralgy, and a gettin’ ready for the collapse, she’s been ‘oppin’ and ‘owlin’ about the ‘ouse most ‘evinly. She went to three tea-swillings and a Hold Woman’s Flannel Petticoat and Vesket Association meeting last week, at which a highly learned gentleman from America addressed the meeting. She came home that evening with that abom’nable fat old Mother Burman—if they hadn’t had some of the brain-pan sapping

stuff in their tea that night I'll eat my head—and will you believe it, they atchilly had the audacity, they did, in the middle of a lot of rubbish in which they'd got Jupiter and Dr. Adam Clarke, Tom Payne, the Scarlet Woman of Babbylon, and Old Mother Hubbard rubbish o' the same natur' mixed up, to try and cram down my throat that there was railway trains running before the coming of our Lord. Mad? I got as mad as a mad bull—but there! that Mother Burman would talk the hind-leg of a donkey off. I never came near a woman with such a power of jaw in my born days. I told 'em all about Robert Stephenson and the Rocket, and I might just as well have talked to the currants and raisins in the front shop. Mother Burman said they'd found entire railway trains, with the crumbling bodies of the guards and stokers, and all the rest of it, at a place she called Minerva. I couldn't even persuade her she meant Nineveh—not a bit of it; and the end of it was they talked me clean out of house and home, and I had to go over to the George.'

'Not a very pleasant evening for you, sir, I'm afraid,' said Joe, laughing heartily at the indignation of his relative. 'How did you get on over the races? You backed the squire's horse, of course?'

'I ought to have done so, Joseph, I'll admit, particularly after what you told me, but some of Blake's people came in one day to get some rock salt, and they told me such a yarn about their mare—the one as got second, you know—that I thought foxy old Tatham might be out of it this time, so I just put my little bit on t'other.'

'On the second?' exclaimed Joe carelessly.

‘Aye, lad ; it wasna much I lost—a matter of a few pounds only. But where’s Miller ? he’s late, isn’t he ?’

‘No !’ said Joe, looking at his watch. ‘It is only just eight ; we shall have him for many a good game to-night. You are very early, you see. Lizzie, love, don’t be gone long up to Mother Wagstaffe’s !’

‘Where’s the girl going ?’ said Ardron, in some surprise.

‘I am going, father,’ she replied, looking him full in the face, ‘with a few little delicacies for poor Mrs. Wagstaffe at the cottage up the lane : she is very ill indeed, and Joe thinks with me that we ought to assist her.’

‘A very charming exposition of the Divine creed of charity,’ interpolated Bridgeman, after a hearty pull at his tankard of malt.

‘Well, it’s a charming variety, I’ll grant you,’ growled the head of the house of Ardron. ‘However, wonders will never cease. First I learn that I could have gone to Timbuctoo by railway thousands of years before I was born ; and next, my daughter’s doing the charitable dodge. However, thank goodness, here’s Miller at last. Good-evening, Miller ! How are you, Miller ? Looks hearty, don’t he ? and now, while my charming and extry dootiful offspring’s agoin’ in for charity—eh, Joe, my lad—we’ll fill our pipes and have a friendly game.’

‘With very much pleasure,’ assented Joe, following his wife with his eyes as she left the room.

At the door she paused, and stood looking at him for a second’s space. Then she blew him an airy kiss from the tips of her charming fingers, and Joe, happy and contented, sat down and shuffled the cards. Let him hold as good cards as he might, his queen was trumped by the knave that night.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

### OUT IN THE MOONLIGHT.

‘The devil’s in the moon for mischief.

\* \* \* \* \*

And then she looked so modest all the while.’

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BYRON.

THE soft silvery moon, rising slowly and majestically above the dark, gloomy belt of woods on the farther side of the river, flooded the still, silent scene with a far-spreading expanse of hazy, yet bright light. Close at hand, so luminously clear was the light that one could count the blades of grass nodding their tiny plumed heads to the soft breath of the autumnal night—could count the petals of the scarlet geraniums and the great dewdrops hanging pendent from the bowed heads of the last of the queenly summer roses—brilliant, sparkling drops that seemed like so many tears shed in grief by the flowers for their waning beauty. The light glistened brightly on the sharp points of stones on the pebbly shore—shone clear and distinct on flakes of foam that came swiftly hurrying by from the thunderous weir fall. Circling ripples as they floated onwards, and long oily glides forming here and there on the still, sombre surface of the stream, caught glittering reflections from the queen of night. Every

now and then round, irregularly-formed rings showing where the stream eddied over some deep hole—the haunt of a big pike or a shoal of armoured perch—reflected the silvery sheen again from the edges of their transient, fleeting shapes. Across the stream, and one could just catch the dusky form of the moorhens and quaint-looking bald-headed coots as they emerged from the sheltering shadows thrown by the tall rushes. These went pottering about with quick, jerky steps, until they were lost in the mist-wreathed meadows. Afar off, upon the misty upland slopes, huge trees loomed clear and distinct against the indigo-coloured sky, aflame with thousands of tiny glittering lamps. Below the sky-line trunks and foliated masses were all blurred and invisible in one unbroken line of dark, ghostly shade.

The white bridge, with its ramshackle old wheels and creaking rusty chains for opening the sluices and water-gates, its time-worn piers of mossy, lichen-cruste stone, its massive levers and pulleys, lay deep and well-nigh invisible in the gloomy, lengthened reflections of the trees. These old trees had multiplied in strength and beauty for ages, until their trailing branches well-nigh swept the fierce rush of water that denoted the best trout-run at the weir. This millpool was a famous home for big trout, and many an angler had spun his well-fitted dace or twirling bleak across and about, and down the sharp run of foaming water, close in to the tree-roots, and next instant deftly out again, in the hope of feeling the fiercely impetuous tug of one of the crimson-spotted denizens of the eddying mill-race. At present, the dimly discerned gleam of the water, as it caught traces of reflected light and bore them on its snowy volume,

was the only trace of the whereabouts of the trout-run. Everything lay in deep, solemn shadow, dappled with clear patches of light, seen from openings in the trees, while there was only a faint indistinct line to mark where the broad, white hand-rail of the bridge ran. Broad light and deep shadow spread itself everywhere in profusion, and nature, solemnly beautiful at all times, seemed still more so as she lay sleeping in the moonlight.

Lizzie looked very fair and lovely, with the chaste moonbeams falling on her varying features, the dead-gold ripples in her hair, as stepping out from the low wicket-gate that led into the interior of some of the mill buildings, she emerged from the darksome shadows thrown by the great, disused wind-sails. There she stood for a second or two, basket in hand, looking upon the homely, quiet scene. She was without hat or bonnet, but had a bright scarlet shawl, of some soft, fleecy material, covering her head, all save some few luxuriant curls that, escaping bondage, hung idly and carelessly over her white forehead, shading the soft beauty of her liquid eyes. Little doubt that this moonlit night was an eventful one—an important stepping-stone in the rugged way—and none knew it better than she herself.

For one moment, taking in at a glance all the beauteous features of the tranquil scene, she wavered. She listened to the low murmur of voices in the room, not ten yards from where she stood, and heard her husband's clear, hearty laugh ring out upon the silent night. Next Miller's voice was heard with his eternal 'There, that's two by honours and the odd trick !' She shivered slightly, and presently a great moth, humming pleasantly by her ear, kept up, with others of his

tribe, a quaint murmur of low, buzzing music among the flaming geraniums and broad-petalled, purple pansies, that sounded more grateful to her ear than she could ever remember it before. The pansies looked up at her with their yellow eyes in the moonlight, with an expression that, to her excited fancy, was something like Joe's, and she half thought that they whispered softly to her, as their broad leaves rustled, 'Don't go, mistress.'

Never had the hurrying rush of water from the weir sounded so harmoniously sweet and lulling to her senses. It seemed like a magnificent hymn to the night, sung by the water-kelpies. Never had her riverside home seemed to force its bluff, sturdy, honest beauty so much upon her as upon this night, and she stood wondering why it was so. She glanced upward at the wind-sails, and next listened, with a newly-awakened pleasure, to the splashy, soothing drip, drip, of the falling water over the moss-grown wheel. For one second she loved the honest purple pansies with a gust of awakened feeling, and stooped to pick two or three of the blossoms, kissing them and next hiding them in her soft white bosom. She strolled slowly and wearily down the garden-path and out on the moonlit road. She listened with almost painful attention to the calling of some partridges in the stubble-fields close to her. Even they seemed to say—the bonnie brown birds—'Come back, come back !'

Then she thought of Hubert and his scented, fragrant hair, his blue eyes, his gay, debonair voice and manner. Ah ! he would take her to Paris ; she should thus get away from the eternal swash and dapple of the overflowing river. The tinkling drip of the wheel began to grow odious to her.

She would see life, the world, a thousand unknown, undreamt-of delights which she could never experience here—and her thoughtful, busy mind opened soft vistas of pleasure. Besides, she loved him—her own, her very own Hubert—she told herself, and after that, life with her husband! with plodding, hard-handed Joe! she shuddered at its very impossibility. She went swiftly enough now along the river-bank, and remembering the pansies, stopped for one moment to throw the flowers far out upon the river in the quivering moonlight. They were the last links that bound her to her home. As they dwindled less and less in the uncertain, shivering rays, the fitful, eddying water whirled them round and round with fearsome rapidity, but at last sucked them down. With their death died the still, small voice that but a while ago had whispered softly, tapping at her heart the while with gentle touch, as though to keep aflame the better and holier fire burning within her soft, heaving bosom.

Hushed the partridges now. White arms seemed to be wreathing and beckoning to her from the shadowy water; dancing, gliding ghosts to be flitting behind the well-remembered trees, motioning her onwards. She caught sight at last of an idle form standing listlessly on the bridge, and went on—straight, swift, silent as death itself—to her own dishonour.

‘And so you have come, darling, at last?’ he said, advancing to meet her, and turning her sweet, fair face until the round, silver moon shone full upon the lovely features—‘come at last, to make the night sweet to me, my debt of gratitude all the heavier?’



‘Ah, yes, Hubert! I have come, God help me! And now that I am here, I would to heaven, almost, that I had never seen you!’

‘Why, what is this, *très chère enfant*? Never seen me! Then would that lovely face have been condemned to the horrible mockery of being pillowed nightly on the bosom of a hind; a life-long misery with a man—a serf—two degrees only removed from a brute!’

‘Silence!’

She hissed out the word in an instant. It sounded like the sharp whistle of a whip-lash.

She raised her fair head with the action of a snake before it strikes—an impulsive gesture, full of grace and dignity, springing into life from her youth, her queenliness of carriage, and the excessive beauty of her face and form.

Hubert Welford stood as one paralyzed. For one moment he seemed to have neither the power of speech nor action.

‘Lizzie!’ at length he said, in tones of unqualified astonishment, and half retreating from her; ‘Lizzie!’

‘Forgive me, Hubert!’ she cried, lifting her face with her soft, humid eyes full of tears. ‘Forgive me, my own! I could not help it, for I am very, very miserable to-night. But do let us understand one another,’ she pleaded. ‘From first to last, no matter what happens, you must forget my husband. Cease to remember his existence, as I do. One thing, however, bear in mind. I will never hear him spoken ill of. To him I owe everything I possess save the honesty of my own love. That I cannot give him, because it is yours. None the less is he a brave, honest, and true man, and therefore you shall not sneer at him, Hubert!’

It is possible she was thinking of the pansies at that moment.

‘Don’t you think, then, my dear Lizzie,’ he presently said, with a palpable and cruel sneer, for he had completely regained his usual self-possession—‘don’t you think that with the knowledge of such a mass of human perfections up yonder,’ and he pointed to the dark outline of the mill, ‘it is somewhat bad form of you to be here?’

‘Possibly it is, Captain Welford,’ she replied icily. ‘You will remember, perhaps, that I came to meet you.’

‘I know it, *ma belle*, and I owe you my eternal gratitude ; but why in heaven’s name, before you have kissed me even, snap my nose off?’

‘It was an impulse, and I am sorry for it. I ask your forgiveness. A woman can hardly contemplate the step you spoke of without feeling some slight amount of compunction. I admit frankly that I do ; not because I love my husband, for I care no more for him, as love goes, than I care for one of those water-hens yonder. He loves *me*, however ; and when I go he will sicken and pine away, just as a dove does whose mate is shot.’

‘A very pretty and poetical picture, dearest,’ he said with a gay, careless laugh. ‘You don’t mind me smoking, I know. But you are somewhat out of bounds, methinks, in your parable from natural history. The very respectable bird you have just mentioned does NOT pine away like a blasted oak or a bruised lily, whichever simile you may prefer. Much too wise a member of the feathered creation, believe me. He simply goes out some fine morning, like a fine, jolly old bird as he is, and appropriates another mate ;

then, as the good story-books say, lives happily ever afterwards.'

'Yes, some may do so, Hubert,' she replied to his mocking speech. 'You would, I fancy. Others, on the contrary, sit by the deserted nest until they die. You see there is a difference amongst birds.' At that moment she caught the distant cry of the partridges again across the deserted, misty fields. It sounded ominously, and somewhat like a warning voice in the still, serene night.

'Exactly, I know there is. Thank heaven, I flatter myself that I am hardly the kind of man to sit over a lot of dismal old ashes, trying to kindle afresh their wonted fires. No, not much. But with regard to the "deserted nest" business, why leave it all if the very gentlemanly male bird is at all likely to moult prematurely?'

'This, then, Hubert,' she cried hastily, and throwing back her scarlet shawl in the excitement of the moment, disclosing her classically beautiful head, all covered with curls, 'is your vaunted love for me?'

'Not at all, darling—pardon ; but let me drape your head again, on account of the night-dews. I love you, Lizzie, in precisely the same ratio as I did before. I honestly and sincerely felt a great tenderness for you, and I equally honestly and sincerely experienced a passionate desire and longing to see you again before I left England. Well, I did see you, and your own lips—the sweetest lips in England, I vow—told me that which I never even suspected, *that you really cared for me*. It did not take me long to assume that you had not much feeling in common with that very excellent and wonderfully fat good miller yonder. Bah ! let it pass,

love ; I must have my joke. Ten thousand graces ! I reaped so rich a harvest in that shady lane, that I naturally desired to glean the last ear of corn. I brook no other gleaner, though, upon the stubbles ; neither will I have the owner of the corn—that's you, my pet—tell me that I stole in like a thief in the night to do my gleaning. In other words, to drop metaphor, I don't care to have a woman about me who upon the slightest provocation lifts up her finger and taunts me with "tempting her." All very well for the stage, Lizzie ; in real life, depend upon it, it's all humbug and an infernal nuisance.'

'You speak plainly, Hubert.'

'It has been a characteristic since my birth, *ma belle*,' he replied gaily. 'My desire for infant sustenances and goodies was expressed, I believe, according to chronicles of the nursery, in wonderfully distinct terms. Consequently I got what I wanted. But come, love, I don't like to see tears in those glorious eyes, although, by this light, it only makes them the more lovely. Kiss me, darling, and forget and forgive like a dear fairy as you are.'

He drew her closely to him, within range almost of eyes that might be looking on from the mill. The moon had flooded the bridge with its clear white light by this time, and the lamp in Joe's window shone like a beacon lit by good angels who were beckoning her back with loving hands.

Apart from the fact that, save perhaps for transient gleams of true feeling, the woman was utterly heartless, entirely unappreciative, this gay, good-humoured banter, with its spice of devilry, had for her a certain amount of charm. It was entirely unlike anything that she had experienced

before. At one moment Hubert's voice sounded sternly determined ; at another, his tone suddenly changed, and his words were invested with such an amount of tender, pleading passion as carried all reflection with it like a cork upon a torrent.

‘You love me, do you not, Hubert?’ she asked at length, as, yielding to his embrace, her head rested upon his bosom.

‘Love you? Yes, baby, dearer than you wot of! Now kiss me, my own, and let us forget all, save that the night is ethereally beautiful, and that the winds envy us our happiness.’

A long-drawn, passionate embrace. Her sweet face looked upward at his, with its meaning, wayward eyes. Her arms stole softly round his neck, her fingers tangling with the curly chestnut hair.

‘Hubert, Hubert, my soul!’ she murmured, while the lamp of love, fresh kindled, burnt with radiant flame in her eyes. ‘To lose thee now! My God! my God! I cannot lose thee, Hubert, my own, for thy love is mine, and mine is life itself!’

‘Neither shall you, dearest, fairest Lizzie. Your happiness henceforth is my care. You shall be as a priceless pearl amongst women—the queen of envying hundreds—instead of being boxed up in this pottering village, with no one to really value, at its true worth, the gem it contains. But come, darling, if you forget, I must not. Time is flying rapidly, and, for the present, yonder lies your anchorage. Would to heaven I could take you this very hour. Why, do you know,’ he concluded, looking at his watch, ‘it is nearly ten o’clock.’

‘Ten o’clock, Hubert ! impossible, darling !’

‘Indeed it is. See,’ and he turned the face of his watch until the moon’s rays fell directly upon it.

‘Why, what shall I do ? Supper is always served at ten, and I must run up to leave this basket with Mrs. Wagstaffe at the cottage there—that white one with the light in the window—the poor soul is very ill.’

‘Give me your basket, sweetheart. I will see to that. It will take you at least a quarter of an hour to go there and back. Hark ! I can hear voices at the mill—slip into the shadows of those trees. Now, pet, one last kiss, and then run for your life.’

She gave him the basket, hardly knowing what she did. He caught her to his bosom, and rained a shower of hot, passionate kisses upon her face. On her part, she drew his head towards her, and kissed his handsome eyes—a last lingering pressure of the hands, and she was gone like a shadow. In another second or two he heard her footsteps pattering along the shingly gravel of the river’s bank.

An amused smile flitted across his face as he opened his cigar-case, and carefully selected a cabana. Lighting it, he began puffing out the smoke, with evident satisfaction, into thin jets which floated away before the night wind, just beginning to sough among the willow-boughs. ‘A very skittish filly that,’ he said softly to himself ; ‘hot-blooded and impetuous. Devilish skittish, bad mouth, and awkward in her paces. *Eh, bien !* We have met the same strain before, and my experience is that, properly broken in, they’re very useful cattle.’ Suddenly he recollected the basket, which lay at his feet. ‘Hum !’ said he, while the next instant he

laughed aloud. 'A new *rôle*, Hubert, *mon ami*—almoner for a miller's wife. Hardly in my line, I think, although sne's undeniably nice—emphatically nice! Suppose I ground-bait a swim? Ha—admirable notion! somebody will catch a barbel next year with a flavour of calves' foot jelly about it, and write to the *Times*.'

The next instant Mrs. Wagstaffe's basket, heavily laden, was flung amidst the foaming swash and rippling torrent of the Pool. He stood watching the water for a moment or two, thinking of how his late companion was getting on, and then, turning on his heel, quietly sauntered up the moonlit lane.

As for Lizzie, she sped homewards swift as a fawn, and Joe was so elated with having won the rubber without giving Miller and his partner a chance, that he never so much as dreamt of asking her how it was she had been so long away when they took their places at the supper-table.





## CHAPTER XXIV.

### IN CHAMBERS.

A MONTH has passed by swiftly enough since the events narrated in the last chapter, and eleven o'clock had just chimed through the foggy, murky air of a December morning from the ugly square tower of St. James's, Piccadilly. It was a morning when omnibus horses, pulled up for a brief halt at the Circus, looked as if they had just come out of a hot bath, from the cloud of steam rising from their heaving, panting flanks and downcast heads. A morning when tattered, woe-begone beggars, some of them with bleared, hypocritical eyes, and a gin-soddened, leary look lurking at the corners of their tobacco-smirched mouths; others bearing the impress of undeniable misery and want stamped upon their haggard faces, alike pulled their scanty rags closer to their shivering bodies, and save when ordered by that imperial autocrat of the London streets, the London policeman, to 'Move on, there!' glued their frost-bitten noses closer to the steamy windows of restaurants or appetizing confectioners' shops.

Eleven o'clock, and men, well wrapped up from the chill, biting air, hurry east and west, jostling against pretty girls,



all with their faces set westwards. These are followed in some cases by boys bearing a milliner's basket, in others they carry it themselves, where the establishment cannot boast of a boy, and most of them are hurrying Park-Lane-wards or Grosvenor-Square way to try on some triumph of millinery, or a high-art creation in the shape of a bonnet. Men well dressed, of course, but bearing that unmistakable, half-indolent, half-confoundedly impertinent air characteristic of a certain class of Government *employés*—although by no means of the whole, thank heaven—lounge carelessly down Waterloo Place, on their way to the Grubbing and Docket Department. Butchers' and greengrocers' carts dash about, pulling up with a rattle at the doors of their respective customers. The drivers swear aloud with mighty emphasis, while some few sporting blades amongst them are bent on staggering their fellows with an account of the enormous *coup* they 'pulled off' on the Cesarewitch! All, however, smirk amiably upon neat-handed Phyllises when they appear at the top of the area steps or the front door, but never fail to go in for another adjective or two when a heavily-laden basket-woman, from far-off Covent Garden, puffing a short pipe to 'keep the fog from off her chest,' staggers up between the wind and their nobility in the murky gloom. Deft-handed shopmen arrange stiff-rustling silks and velvets, wondrous of pile and texture, in cunning, artful folds, so that they may catch long shimmering streaks of light in the great shop-windows. Hansom cabs rattle by, with a late clerk or two for the G. and D. Department, probably half dead with last night's orgie, snug behind the rattling glass window. A file of stalwart policemen, emerging from Vine

Street, tramp along the busy, wide thoroughfare ; tired men are relieved, and the vesuvian boys fly like sparrows at the approach of the fresh official, usually as keen as a hawk after small boys when he first comes on the beat. The fog lifts a little and then gets blacker than ever, with a horrible yellow tint about it. Choking, half-muffled, wheezy coughs are heard, as the vile vapour penetrates to delicate chests and lungs. Gas flares up in every shop-window, only making the thick black atmosphere still more apparent. Oaths are not infrequent, shouts, and an occasional scream. A distant cry of 'Stop thief!' is lost, however, in an instant, in the roar of the traffic, and a real London foggy day has begun.

A man stood softly polishing a patent-leather boot with an old silk handkerchief at the window of a handsome, well-furnished room of a house in Jermyn Street. He was whistling meanwhile, as though whistling was viewed as a sort of light refreshment, in a very low key to himself. There was nothing particularly striking about him. A man of perhaps five-and-thirty, with keen, sharp features, a restless glittering eye, dressed in trousers of dark material, a little shiny at the knees, and a loose morning jacket. He looked to the very letter exactly what he was—sharp as a hawk, unscrupulous, neat handed, and, as he said of himself, 'fly to every game on the board'—a thorough gentleman's gentleman.

A breakfast tray stood upon the table waiting for some one to pay attention to it. A little pile of letters flanked the plate, the uppermost in a pale pink envelope, the superscription in a woman's sprawling hand. Some of the others were enclosed in common blue envelopes. These smelt of

duns, the bottom missive of all was a long official-looking document, bearing the initials 'O.H.M.S.' The half-hour chimed, and then the quarter to twelve; still the man at the window never stirred, but proceeded with the task of softly polishing the boot, whistling in a minor key and staring out at the fog-shrouded street.

The half of a set of folding-doors swung gently back, and a man wrapped in a handsome dressing-gown, with pale, haggard face, and dark bistre circles under his eyes, entered the room. It was Hubert Welford.

'That you, Biggs?' he queried sharply and irritably.

'Yessir,' answered the man with the boot, swinging quickly from the window, and facing his master.

'Then for heaven's sake get me a soda and brandy. Quick!—confound you, don't you see that my throat is parching?'

'Yessir!' answered Biggs, with an air as though he had just examined his master's throat under a powerful lens.

Pop! and out fizzed the soda-water into a tall tumbler, which Hubert grasped with a trembling hand, never putting it down until he had drained the last drop.

'Ugh!' he shivered, 'it's as cold as a Jew's charity, What a beastly morning! Pull down those infernal blinds, and light the gas, Biggs. Anybody been?'

'No, sir. Beg parding—yessir. Mr. Tinto Splorge, sir. Hartist, I think, sir. Come about the Virgin Mary, sir. Got a customer, sir.'

'Ah—h!' snarled Hubert. 'Pour me out some coffee, confound you! Did Splorge leave any message? Kidneys done to death, as usual.'

‘Yessir, they is. Very late, sir. No, sir, Mr. Splorge didn’t leave no message.’

Tinto Splorge was a very fashionable artist just then, who painted horrible daubs in blue and yellow, without a particle of art or merit in them, which he called harmonies. That didn’t matter; ‘society’ bought them, and Splorge painted for society and society’s money, and throve on it. He was not anything like such an ass as to live on a crust and a red herring and paint good work, and leave society to approve his worth when he was dead. Not he—he painted for the taste of the day, and, as everybody with a particle of sense will say, ‘A good judge too.’ The ‘Virgin Mary’ was a real Titian, which was given to Hubert in his childhood by his father, and he had smuggled it somehow away from the hall. As he anticipated going abroad, he had commissioned Splorge to find him a purchaser, and that worthy gentleman was not very long about it. He knew people, out of the harmony-loving ‘society’ groove, of course, who were always open to buy an undoubted Titian—equally, of course, at a price.

‘What in the name of fate are these letters about?’ cried Hubert, pettishly pushing his plate away. The first to hand was that with the pink envelope. ‘Hum! post-mark, Alcaston. From Lizzie, eh!’ he exclaimed. ‘Well, that can wait. What do they say at the Horse Guards? Accepted my resignation. Very good of ’em, I’m sure; and the sooner I get matters settled and out of this cursed country, the better I shall like it. “Saker, wine merchant,” eh! Go to the devil, Saker!’ and that letter was consigned to the flames without even the seal being broken. ‘“Trimmer,

trousers and habit-maker." Go to blazes!"—and it went ; 'and now then,' said he, with rather an uncomplimentary yawn, 'to see what my peerless Sultana has got to say for herself.'

The Sultana had simply written a letter of four pages, crossed and recrossed in every conceivable direction, over which he 'pished' and 'pah'd' to an inconceivable extent. He cursed the folly of women in writing a lot of twaddle, the tenour of the epistle, as Hubert put it, being after all but a repetition of many others. It was this—'Make haste and fetch me away.'

'Biggs, where are you?' cried Hubert sharply. 'What the devil are you doing?'

'Puttin' things shipshape, sir—yessir. Pack o' cards in one corner—young ladies' photigraphs all upside down—cigars upset, sir—diamond ring in another corner: things look altogether as if there'd been a cupple o' racoons, sir, a-playin' at cricket in the bedroom, sir!'

'Well, now, just shut up and attend to me, will you?'

'Yessir.'

'I'm going abroad, Biggs, directly—France and Italy, most probably ; and you will have to go with me. I shall not want my uniform any longer, Biggs. Things are queer, very queer. My cursed brother won't make me any better allowance ; and how the devil am I to live, as the rest of'em do, on a paltry three hundred and my pay? Not to be done—I've sold out, Biggs.'

'Yessir!'

'For goodness' sake, Biggs, don't stand there like an infernal, half-educated mummy, who can only say one word.

Give me a cigar and some claret. No ; stay. I'll have some hock and seltzer.'

'Yessir !'

'And, Biggs, I may as well tell you, I'm going to be married !'

The valet paused in the act of pouring out the seltzer, heaved a deep sigh, and then said :

'Married ! I'm damned if I didn't think so. I beg pardon, sir ; I'm teetotally flabbergasted !'

'What about, Biggs ? I am tired of this infernal life—kicking about London, flirting, dancing, flower-shows, the Row, and all the mockery—the hollow, rotten mockery of the whole thing ; and I am going to settle down in some delightful nook, and go in for a lot of the *dolce-far-niente* business !'

'Yessir ; very pretty ; but I don't think it'll pay—if I may be so bold.'

'All right, Biggs. Fire away, and give me your own ideas. Now then, why not ?'

'A man, sir, when he's married, sir, loses all vested interest in hisself ; he's, as it were, on lease to the lady for the term of her natural life. Far better, sir—in my view—to himitate the beauties o' nature. Be a butterfly, and flop from plant to plant—I mean from flower to flower. A wife, sir, is, to a man's happiness, what a five-barred gate, double-locked, is to a boy on a donkey—a big obstacle.'

'Biggs,' laughed Hubert, 'you are an infernal scoundrel ; but, admitting a portion of your argument, it does not follow that all women are alike.'

'Jes so, sir ; neither do it follow that they ain't. Woman,

as a woman, is a fine institootion. Once put 'em in a different spear, and, as Shakespeare says, they becomes noosances.'

'I don't call to mind your quotation, Biggs; but, depend upon it, the instant a woman becomes a nuisance to me I drop her like a hot penny. There's some one at the front door. Perhaps it is Splorge; if so, show him up, and—do you hear, Biggs?—keep your mouth shut.'

'Yessir. And about your uniform, sir? What's to be done with it?'

'My uniform? Sell it, Biggs—confound you for a jackal! Sell it—and get drunk on the proceeds.'

Biggs was gone like a shot, and in another moment opened the door again to admit a well-dressed, yet somewhat raffish-looking man, whom he introduced as Captain Johnson.

'Hubert—*beau sabreur*—flower of the British Army—how art thou?'

'Hipped, low, miserable, and confoundedly out of sorts, Bob.'

'Ha, ha! I have thee on the hip. So Connie's been unkind, eh?'

'Hang Connie, and all the St. John's Wood goddesses that ever lived!'

'No, Bob,' he continued after a slight pause; 'but I got shot in the wing last night to a pretty tune. Dycer, Baby Bland—you know him, little smooth-faced brute! the coolest card for all that, that I ever met—and three or four other men dropped in last night. Master Bland got fingering the books, you know, and we sat down to whist at five-shilling points. Then we had some stout and oysters, and wound

up with écarté. Hang me if Dycer didn't bleed me of fifty ; just at the very moment when I could least spare it.'

*Per Baccho*, old boy ! blow care like a bubble to the winds. It's a beastly day, only fit for a cheerful old eremite to study a book of hours in a damp, dismal old cave. Get into your coat, *mon ami* ; light one of those cabanas, they're better than your own. Come down to the club and have some dinner ; and to-night, child, I'll show you some fun.'

'Fun ! what's afloat ?'

'My dog fights to-night, old man. I think him safe to win, and by George ! you and I, and one or two more of the right sort, will go and see the little slasher do it.'

'All right, Bob ; anything for a quiet life. You've heard, of course, that I've sent my papers in ?'

'Yes ; Dycer told me so. What the devil's it all about ?'

'The fact is, Bob, I can't go the pace with the others any longer. They are a warm lot, as you know ; and then, most important fact of all, only that's strictly between ourselves, I'm spoons on a man's wife. I'm going to cut and run, and when I do I shall take her with me.'

'You'll never be such an ass, Hubert !' cried Johnson, elevating his eyebrows.

'By Jove, I shall, sir ! and so would you if you knew her. She's the loveliest woman that ever wore Balmoral boots, and I'm open to bet you anything in reason that a month hence all Paris is in love with her, from Napoleon down to a chiffonnier.'

'Well, by heaven, Welford, you stagger me ! You admit that you're plucked a bit, and are yet going to cumber yourself with a woman !'



‘Not half so expensive, *ami*, as taking a hansom and calling at South Bank, take my word for it. Besides, this is not a woman, she’s a houri. Her only fault is that she’s a bit hard in the mouth.’

‘Well,’ ejaculated Johnson carelessly, ‘*chacun à son gout*. Thank goodness it’s not my line. You won’t be long dressing?’

‘No. Biggs! Confound it! that man’s never here when he’s wanted. Where the deuce have you been, sir?’ concluded Hubert, as the valet entered the room. ‘Hot water and my boots, directly. There’s the *Sporting Life*, Bob; rattling fight with the Slasher in it;’ and so saying Welford left his friend to himself.

A quarter of an hour afterwards Hubert, by the aid of his valet, looked a different man. He went into his bedroom a slipshod rake, and came out of it the model of a scented, trim, glossy, cool man about town; and after leaving directions for his portmanteau to be packed ready for a run out of town for a day or two on the morrow, the two men lighted cigars and strolled down Jermyn Street, somewhat clearer now of the fog, staring every decent woman out of countenance, on their way to the Alluminium.

Biggs watched the two men as they sauntered slowly up the street, noting the thin wreaths of smoke floating behind them upon the foggy air, watched them out of sight, and then, heaving a deep sigh, he turned and shut the front door.

‘What a pity, what a pity,’ he said softly to himself, ‘as a hotherwise intellectool young man like the capting should conderscend to a lie—to me, too, as brushes his coat and his trowsis, and takes precious good care to make a mental

hinventory of the contents of his pockets. "Oh, man, man!" as the immortal King Lear says in his distress, "what a hinferral idiot you are arter all!" So they is, and woman's a deal worse, for but for women the world would be spared half its misery. Married! S'elp me never! Married—just as if I hadn't read every dainty note, pink of course, and scented likewise, as she ever sent him. Knows her as well, I does, as ever the capting does, and better. He sees her with the heye of a individual whose finest senses are swamped in idiotcy—I see her with the hoptic of a man as, as Macbeth says, "has got all his right change, and knows how many beans makes five." I believe you, me boy! Well now, Biggs, take yourself into your own confidence, and what do you make of it? Why, I makes just this of it, the lady won't suit. Thy name alone will damn thee! Ha, ha! And here the worthy gentleman, having reached his master's breakfast-room again, posed himself in a striking attitude before the looking-glass, and then sat down to the untouched kidneys and dry toast, and polished the lot off, communing with himself the while.

'Lizzie, eh! Well, a very pretty name for a greengrocer's lady. One of them as comes down to 'Ampton in a pair of white cotton gloves and black mits. I dessay she thinks herself no end of a swell, but I don't think any Lizzie as ever stepped will suit Capting Hubert; not if I've hanalyzed him right, and I think I have. "What's in a name? A rose," etc. There, Billy, you're wrong, very wrong. A fifty-pun' note smells a deal thicker, like, than a "fiver," and where I could adore a Hadelaide Halbertina I should think very small potatoes of a Hann. There's a lot in a name. Ah, ring

away, my friend, ring away,' he concluded, as a sounding tintinnabulation pealed through the house. 'Let one of the gals go. I'll take odds it's Mister Tinto Splorge come again about the "Virgin Mary." What's in a name? Well, there's another example. Mr. Tight'un, as painted that there hugly daub—a woman with a blue shawl and a hinfant on her lap as looks as if he'd been fed up for a baby show at North Woolwich—is dead and gone; good luck to him! Loads of people are after that 'ere picture because he is dead. Let a gentleman with six kids and a consumptive wife to keep paint one as beats that into a cocked-hat, and he may sit and starve before anybody will buy it. Goes down to Wardour Street at last, it does. Verdict of the jury, "Sarves him right."'

'Well, what is it, Mary?' he asked, as a smartly-dressed black-eyed girl put her head in at the door. 'No; master hain't in, my princess. What would I give for one embrace, one kiss of them ruby lips! Hoh! Mr. Splorge, is it? Well, will you oblige me, my charmingest, by telling Mr. Splorge that the capting have gone to dine at the Halluminium? and, my queen, bring me the newspaper, will you? I'm going to 'ave a cigar.'

Selecting one with great care from the open box of Manilas, Biggs appeared to sink into deep meditation. There we will leave him.





## CHAPTER XXV.

### A NIGHT WITH THE FANCY.

‘I TELL you what it is, Hubert,’ said Johnson impatiently, as they sat in the lofty, handsome smoking-room at the Aluminium—you all know where it is, so there’s not the least necessity for me to tell you—I shall not wait any longer for Bland—beastly little humbug!—he’s always late unless he’s got any money to draw at the Corner. Then he’s there fast enough, and early, you bet. By Jove! it’s half-past seven now, and we’re to scale at eight. Not another minute. Waiter, here; Mr. Dycer’s in the house, I know—you’ll find him in the billiard-room—go and tell him that Captain Welford and I are about to start. Going, in fact, in two minutes.’

‘Yes, sir. Your brougham is at the door already, sir.’

‘I know. Go and tell Dycer at once, there’s a good fellow. I can’t wait another moment.’

‘Has Bland come yet?’ asked Dycer, a tall, gentlemanly-looking fellow, who entered the room a few moments afterwards.

‘No; not yet,’ replied Johnson. ‘The little devil has only got a “fiver” in it, and I suppose he thinks it hardly

good enough to stop rattling the box at Jacquotti's upon the chance of winning. How he manages to win there night after night I cannot make out. Everything must be on the square, I suppose, because there are men there who would drive the blade of a knife through his hand as he rattled the dice, and pin it to the cloth !

'Oh, he plays fairly enough ! He has not got the pluck to cheat, but the very devil's own luck seems to lurk up his sleeve in everything bar women. There he's done brown as a chip. Eulalie won't look at him ! The Forest told him to his face, the other night, when he begged to see her home to South Bank, that she should fancy herself a rabbit in a burrow, and he a ferret !'

'Flattering, wasn't it,' laughed Dycer, 'from a girl, too, whose father was a farmer ? Accounts for the association of ideas, I suppose. And, will you believe me, he got chatting with Connie Dysart the other night, and—by Jove !—she told him that she didn't want any calicoes just then, but if he would leave her his card, she'd call at his shop when she did. "Baby" dropped her like a hot cinder, went straight to Jacquotti's, sat down as cool as a cucumber, drank nothing but seltzer and hock, and cleared Bertie Cheveley clean out of three hundred. Fact, by Jove ! Now, then, about this expedition ?' concluded Dycer.

'As far as I'm concerned, I'm not going to wait another moment,' said Johnson. 'The brougham's at the door. Devil take it ! twenty minutes to eight. Come along, you fellows, at once. Jarvis,' said Johnson quietly, addressing his coachman, who leaned down from his box to catch the captain's orders, 'spin along through the City, quick as you

like—up the City Road, and put me down just over the canal bridge ; I'll tell you where. Take up same place at eleven.'

'Very good, sir.'

'*Entrez !*' exclaimed Johnson, opening the door of the brougham. 'Smoke ? Of course you may. My lady mother has had to put up with it before, and will again, *mes amis*.'

They rattled swiftly enough behind Johnson's chestnut through the half-deserted City streets, along Moorgate Street, the wretched-looking Finsbury waste, and the Sahara of the City Road. Just after they had cleared the canal bridge Johnson pulled the check-string, and all three men got out from the bright lamp-lit interior of the brougham, and found themselves on the pavement of a desolate street, from which a smaller turning branched off to the right. There was a coal-wharf, with a ghostly-looking untenanted box of an office looking out upon the stagnant, muddy waters of the canal at one corner, and the closed shutters of a deserted baker's shop at the other. A ragged, tattered bill flapping idly from the panel of the shutters informed all whom it might concern that there was 'Glorious news ! Flour down again to 7d.' 'Altogether,' as Hubert said, 'Johnson had brought them to a remarkably mouldy-looking neighbourhood.'

'At this corner, Jarvis, at eleven to the moment,' said Johnson, in low tones.

'All right, sir.'

The next moment the man drove off.

'Hubert, *tres cher*,' said Johnson, as they stood at the entrance of the filthy, noisome smelling side-street—a street

looking so black with its few solitary lamps, and they even burning dimly, that it put them in mind of the mouth of a sewer—‘you, I know, are a bit of a griff at this business. All I want you to do is just to follow Dycer’s lead and mine—be surprised at nothing—we might get into a bit of tangle—there, I know I can depend upon you. If we do, let each man think for himself, and get out as best he can. *Allons !* and without another word the three went down the black, dismal street in Indian file.

Gustave Doré would have been delighted, wondrous master that he is, not alone of the grandest conceptions, but of the art of depicting mysterious shadowy corners and nooks filled with mystic horror, in the light and shade of this horrible street. Open doors gave to the curious passer-by strange glimpses of Rembrandtesque interiors, where children nearer approached in their unkempt desolation the ghoul of Eastern story than English flesh and blood. Most of them were huddled like unclean animals round a handful of glimmering fire. Women, too, there were—in their fresh green youth possibly comely girls—now so soddened in drink and debased by vice in its every hideous feature, that they looked simply what they were, unhappy vehicles for cumbering the earth with a further generation stamped with disease and crime. A single lamp, beyond the few scattered street-lights necessary to give a pallid reflection to so much misery glittered bright over the door of a dirty, low-ceilinged public-house. The door was pushed open by Johnson, and he and his friends entered the bar, a wide, smoke-grimed compartment, which was filled by a motley assemblage of men of every grade of ruffianism under the sun. These were

the outsiders—the better-class supporters of the little world of sport, of which this house was a head-centre, had yet to put in an appearance.

Jim Berry, the host, was of all men the very last whom one would have thought to see officiating as the high-priest of such an order. He was round, rotund, rubicund, racy of voice and manner—clean as a pink, bright and clear of skin, with an eye blue, kindly and mellow, that glittered like a star. He left the *sanctum sanctorum* of his bar, where he was drawing pots ‘o’ four ‘arf’ with an arm that might have served as a model for Praxiteles or Michael Angelo, and came at once to greet the three men.

‘My noble captain, you’re a sight for sore eyes. Come in, my pippin. Gentlemen, your most obedient, yours truly, James Berry.’

With this introduction he ushered them into his *cabinet particulière* behind the bar, turning up the gas at the same time so as to fully illuminate the surroundings.

Over the mantelshelf, black and grimy with age and want of attention with a duster, was a fine old engraving of Crib and Molyneaux setting-to on a raised stage, surrounded by just as motley a gathering as that seen in the outer bar. Corinthians there were, of course, and equally of course another set, who could hardly be classified correctly. If they were Corinthians, they were undoubtedly of a mouldy type, ragged and out at elbows. Two stuffed dogs’ heads, chumpy and grim of muzzle, peered out from a front view of a kennel-like structure, with a little straw artistically arranged in front. It was a moot point whether they had been uglier in life or in death. Then there was a portrait of



Rochester, a gallant blood-like bay, with all four legs off the ground at once, engaged in some tremendous trotting feat. Coloured prints of long-distance pigeons ; a curious old picture of a yellow and white crop-eared dog battling with a monkey at the old Westminster pit, while a surly-looking brown bear, made fast to a ponderous stake and chain, was apparently carrying out the duties of umpire. There were also sundry highly-coloured portraits of walking celebrities, looking as though they were going somewhere about five-and-twenty miles an hour ; Mendoza and Gentleman Jackson, cheek by jowl with Dutch Sam, Langan, and Belcher—all dead-and-gone heroes of the P.R. In one corner of the room lay a lot of thick sweating-cloths, a hare's skin tied to a string at the end of a stout stick, a strange medley of muzzles of all sizes, dogs' collars and slips, whilst two or three worn out boxing gloves lay piled in a heap upon the top of a rabbit-hutch, in which was confined a black and tan terrier bitch with a litter of puppies.

Johnson ordered a bottle of champagne to be brought, a request which met with prompt attention at the hands of the host, who opened a tap of such a quality, and in such a style, as would have done no discredit either to the cellar or the head-waiter of the Alluminium.

'Don't let us drink from those infernal little thimbles, Bob,' said Hubert Welford. 'It is such rot for men to drink champagne out of glasses only fit for liqueurs. I vote for tumblers and another bottle.'

'Prefers to take his daffy on the "moog" principle,' said Dycer, with a half-wearied smile. 'I don't know that he's not right, after all. I beg to second the motion.'

‘Very well ; carried *nem. con.*,’ laughed Johnson. ‘Go the whole animal, and hang the expense ! Another bottle and tumblers, Jimmy.’

‘Captain, you’re a buster ! so help me ten men and a boy, you’re a buster !’ cried Mr. Berry, in a fever of delight.

In another moment the tumblers creamed over.

‘Gents all,’ said Berry, as he lifted his glass to his lips, adding to Hubert in a confidential aside, ‘Your friend’s dawg’s as certin to win as he’s alive. Cripple me if he ain’t. I seen him yesterday—in fact, Mike brought him in after his walk in the afternoon—and I’m jiggered if he ain’t a perfect picture. Why, you may b’lieve me, gentlemen, you can span his loins easy with yer two hands ; and he’s a biggish dog, too, at his weight. Ah ! and by the Lord Harry, he’s as ’ard as nails !’

Fresh arrivals dropped into the bar every moment, the buzz of conversation and loud greetings became every instant louder. The beer engines kept up a continual clank under the hands of a sturdy barman, and at last Berry said that Johnson must excuse him, for if he didn’t get the people upstairs and quietly out of the way there would be too much fuss. Out he went, therefore, and the Alluminium detachment heard him inviting the company to walk upstairs, where they’d find a nice room and a good fire.

Directly afterwards, however, he put his head in at the door again, and beckoned to Johnson in a most mysterious manner. He got up instantly, prepared to respond to the invitation.

‘Stop for a minute or two, you fellows ! I don’t know what he wants, but I shall be back directly, in any event.’

‘What do you think of this?’ said Dycer, with a curious smile, when he and Hubert were left alone.

‘Which—the wine or the crib?’ drawled the other.

‘Well, both.’

‘The one’s passable. I don’t know that I should care to trumpet out a description of the other in Gath to-morrow. It would hardly suit her Grace of Tarlatan.’

At that instant Johnson rejoined them, leading a dog, or, rather, pulled into the room by a dog, who was smothered in clothing from his ears to his tail, and followed by a man who was introduced as the animal’s trainer. The dog’s clothing (some light sweaters) were then removed, and even to an unpractised eye he was evidently in the best health, his ribs showing clean beneath the skin, and the muscles standing out upon his thighs and shoulders. A handsome dog, certainly, was the general verdict, with long, lean head, and jaws like a rat-trap. All white, with the exception of one brindled patch over his eye. A dog with a round skull and small eyes—almost like a pig’s eyes—set deep in the socket. After he had been duly admired and criticized, Johnson directed Mike, the man who had him in his charge, to ‘get him away upstairs and keep him quiet ;’ and, turning round to his friends, suggested the advisability of proceeding to the top regions themselves as soon as possible. They therefore, under Johnson’s guidance, followed a narrow, dark passage for some little distance, and up a flight of stairs on to the next floor, where they entered a long room and found some twenty or thirty men sitting round the tables, imbibing fluids of all sorts, from humble porter upwards. The room was hazy already with tobacco smoke, each and every man

having a long churchwarden in full blast, the conversation being loud and deep, of dogs—doggy. Their entrance caused some little stir, Johnson being saluted by several of those nearest to him with a certain amount of familiarity, although under the shadow of compliment conveyed by—‘Good evenin’, captain.’ He not unfrequently filled, as Hubert afterwards ascertained, an honoured niche in the Canine column of the *Sporting Life* as ‘Captain W.,’ frequently appearing in the capacity of chairman at gatherings of the ‘fancy.’ He was thus well known to the majority of those present, and that all were ‘safe men’ rest assured.

Making their way to the end of the room, they found, in front of what might be called the chairman’s seat, a large pair of scales placed upon a table, with weights of all sizes arranged neatly for use. Presently the landlord, accompanied by a middle-aged man, with square-cut features, mutton-chop whiskers, and a slightly damaged nasal organ, joined them. The stranger to Hubert and Dycer, although a man perfectly well known to Johnson, turned out to be the referee of the important event about to take place. It was at once agreed upon, at the latter functionary’s suggestion, that, both dogs being there, they could not get to business too soon. Berry, upon being applied to, at once signified that the stakes were paid up, so that everything seemed to be thoroughly *en règle*. The hum of conversation gradually got to a very noisy pitch, occasionally an oath was heard, and sundry ejaculations from gentlemen wishing to take six to four about one of the dogs, but which of them it was not easy to determine amidst the babel of sounds.

‘Bill’s dawg wins for money!’ shouted out a man suddenly

and violently, close to Welford's elbow, who up to that time had not spoken a syllable.

'What'll yer lay?' was the response from several voices.

'What'll I lay?' was the answer, in contemptuous tones—'why, I'll take yer three to one.'

'Not me,' from the opposite side. 'I'll bet evens.'

'Now, gen'elmen!' called out Berry in stentorian tones. 'I must have quiet—bust my eyes if I mustn't! The dawgs are a-going to be weighed, and I'll thank yer all to keep your places. Jack!' he shouted to the potman, who was doing duty as waiter. 'Go up and tell Mike to bring down the captain's dawg, will yer?'

In half a moment the animal was brought in, and, with his clothing and collar taken off, was put into the scales, under the watchful eye of the referee.

'Twenty-two and a 'arf pounds, all but a hounce; that's right, I think.'

This latter query emanated from the merry-eyed little Berry, who was occupied in weighing the dogs.

His opponent was now brought forward, an ugly-looking customer, with nothing like the clean, gentlemanly cut of the white dog, but trained to a nicety. A brindled animal was the new-comer, with heavier looking head and limbs, and, from the scars showing in white seams on his dark hide, evidently an old and experienced warrior. He was a heavy, sleepy-looking dog, with none of the other's animation, and, so far as appearances went, it looked any amount of odds on Johnson's animal. The same ceremony then took place as to the weighing, and, with the exception of the dog being a few ounces over weight, which the captain did

not object to, although his trainer did most emphatically, all looked *couleur de rose* and highly satisfactory.

‘Well, guv’nor,’ said Mike, after a whispered consultation with Johnson as to this latter point, ‘you knows best, in course ; but I’m jiggered if I’d give ’em half a bleedin’ hounce, and you a-layin’ hodds, too ! Why, it ain’t fair, s’elp me !’

‘What the devil’s it got to do with you, Mike, I’d like to know?’ fiercely broke in the gentleman who had been esquiring the dog belonging to the opposite faction. ‘I suppose,’ said he, with withering sarcasm, ‘you ain’t standing much money on it, are you?’

‘No, I ain’t ; but I got my karacter to keep up, for all that, and you knows as well as me what even half a hounce will do in a long go.’

‘Ah, well ! shut yer tater trap, old man,’ said he, in a conciliatory tone of voice. ‘This won’t be ere a long go. I’ll bet yer a crown as I stop yer in ’arf a hour.’

‘Done with you, Jim, on that ! Why, neither you nor any dawg as you ever see can stop my’un in a ’arf hour. I don’t say as he’s a champion, but he’s a good ’un, for all that.’

‘Now gents, make way here, and stop all this damnation row, will yer?’

The latter fierce query was put to the company generally by the blithe-looking Berry, who, coming into the room again, was followed by the potman and another man with some heavy posts and planks, the use of which Hubert at first could not determine. The dilemma was, however, soon solved. Some plugs were taken out of the flooring, and

disclosed four holes, into which the posts were fitted, and it was then seen that a groove ran down the side of each. The plank thus slid easily down, and a square pit was soon formed. The dapper, active potman, armed with a scrubbing-brush and a pail of water, jumped into the pit and scrubbed the floor and sides thoroughly, drying them with a rough towel. In the heat of the room—every instant waxing greater—the boards were soon dry, and the pit was ready for the next action in the drama.

Hubert and Dycer had had their attention so much absorbed in the mysterious preliminaries that had taken place that neither had noticed how rapidly the room had filled. Specimens of every class under the sun were there—heavy swells, with faultlessly fitting coats and Poole's trousers—the sporting butcher from over the way, who owned a fast trotting tit, whose extraordinary accomplishments he was never tired of detailing, so long as he could get people to listen to him. Brother bungs were represented, doubtless friends of the landlord's, together with omnibus drivers and gentlemen's coachmen, while the remainder of the audience was made up of worn-out fighting men, the usual hangers-on of a sporting 'pub,' and an aspiring light weight or two. Long wooden forms were next placed round the pit, the front and best places being taken, of course, by the swells and the better class of men. The others found room where they could.





## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE FIGHT !

‘HUBERT, old boy, you sit by me, and for goodness’ sake don’t make any remarks,’ whispered Johnson ; ‘and Dycer, here’s a place for you on my right.’

Berry made the next movement, which was to get into the pit, and light the burners of a gas pendant, with three jets, which hung from the ceiling. This, having reflectors of bright tin, threw a strong light upon the flooring, and upon the first two rows of the audience, the rest of the room, its occupants and their dirty, unwashed faces, being in deep shade. He then, with a lump of chalk, drew a line across the floor of the pit, from one corner to another, and accurately across the middle, next a semicircular line from two of the angles of the opposite corners, thus forming a boundary, in which space the second of each dog was supposed to take his place. These spaces were called ‘corners,’ the line in the middle being an important one, because each dog must pass over it in his turn when loosed from the restraining grasp of his second, and when about to attack his adversary in the opposite corner, the slightest stop on the part of the dog before crossing this line being claimed by the opposite side as a win.



Mike seconded Johnson's dog, and now got into the pit, the brindle being taken in hand by an extraordinary-looking fellow possessing one eye only, and with one hand doubled up in a very peculiar manner until the stiffened limb was in the form of a hook from the wrist, the fingers being quite fixed and incapable of extension. This was, of course, the result of accident, the man being a celebrated trainer and second from Manchester.

As soon as the dogs were taken over the side they set up an infuriated scream, the instant they got sight of one another, each making frantic efforts to get away from the men holding them. At this juncture Mike whispered a few words in Johnson's ear in a ludicrously significant manner, to which the owner of the dog did not at first seem inclined to pay much attention. Mike, however, pressed his point, and the captain at length said, 'Very well. Certainly, if you think it right!' words which were instantly followed by Mike whipping the collar on his dog's neck again, and passing him over the side of the pit into Johnson's custody.

'Joe!' called out Mike, 'I'm a-going to have a sniff at your dog, old man. I don't *say* as there's anything wrong; but it's just as well, yer know.'

'All right, my lad, fire away,' was the rejoinder; and Joe left his corner, brought his dog into the middle of the pit, and knelt down, holding the dog's head firmly between his knees. The next move somewhat astonished one or two present, for Mike went down on his knees on the floor, and deliberately licked the dog with his tongue from head to foot, going over such places as the shoulder, and under it, the back of the ears, neck, stifle, and top of the loins, with an absolute relish.

After some little time had been spent in this sweet occupation, he scrambled up again, saying: 'Well, I'm satisfied, Joe; and you can do the same wi' my 'un.'

'No, Mike; I'm content to take thee on trust,' replied the man with the natural hook reproachfully. 'An' I should ha' thought as thee'd know'd me better nor that, Mike, by this time.'

Mike turned away with a peculiar look, and a twinkle in his eye, that didn't say much for his faith in Joe's professions.

'Well now, genelman,' cried the blue-eyed, merry-faced Berry, 'I'm timekeeper, recollect that; and if you don't get to work, all the night will go. Toss for first corner—cry to me, Mike;' and spinning a coin in the air, Mike cried 'Head!' and, as it fell 'tails,' he lost, so that it was his turn to 'first corner'—that is, for Johnson's dog to be loosed first, and to go across the pit to his adversary.

'Give me the dog, guv'nor,' said Mike quietly, and taking him over the pit again, and his collar off at the same instant, he stooped, and held the dog with his head facing his opponent.

'Time!' cried the landlord, after an instant's consultation with his watch, and, at the same moment, Mike loosed the dog, who rushed from his corner, and immediately began the battle. Then ensued an absolute Babel. The shouts and screams of would-be backers of either dog were mingled with those of others who began roaring at them at the top of their voices, while, from the frequent shouting of the brindled dog's name, it was evident that a host of his friends were present. 'Hulloo! Billy, boy! Hey, boy! hey, boy!' shouted half a dozen voices at once; while both the seconds

banged the sides of the pit, so as to excite each dog to the uttermost. From the first the brindled dog was unquestionably the better general. As they reared up, wrestling with each other like practised gladiators, Johnson's dog attacked Billy with all possible impetuosity, directing his onset principally at his opponent's head and neck. Neither had, however, got fair hold, and the brindle kept his head well out of reach of the long-fanged jaws of the white dog. Suddenly, as though he had seen an opening and instantly availed himself of it, Billy exerted all his strength, got a good grip, and over rolled the white dog, while, loosing his hold in the very nick of time, quick as thought the brindle had him pinned by the shoulder.

'Two to one I'll bet on Billy!' shouted half a dozen voices, with no response.

'Billy wins, for a bit of money!' roared a tall, cadaverous-looking man at Hubert's back—who had a sweltering, greasy head, dirty face, and a short black pipe, within an inch of his own—very much to that somewhat particular gentleman's intense delight and unbounded enthusiasm. 'I'll lay three to one on Billy; four to one on Billy!' he continued.

'Yes; put me down four half-jimmies!' screamed a man opposite. 'It's me, d'ye hear, Sam—Billy Sprules!' and then he put two forefingers in his mouth and gave a shrill whistle, frightening the pigeons in the dormer—if there were any—as a further means of attracting the notice of the layer of odds.

Meantime, the dogs were in the same position, the brindle still with a hold on Billy's shoulder, while the blood began to trickle freely down his white hide, dabbling the clean

flooring with ugly-looking stains and blotches. Johnson's dog did not seem to have inflicted the least injury up to this time ; his adversary's dark skin, however, would not show the wounds so readily. Presently the prostrate fighter began shuffling with his back and arched loins on the floor of the pit, and shifting his position by sheer muscular strength, aided by immense resolution, until at last he worked his head between the fore-legs of the brindled dog, and popped his long nose in between the top ribs and the under part of the shoulder. Once having got firm hold—a matter which he did not lose any time in doing—he closed his terrible fanged jaws like a vice, and evidently inflicted a most terrible scrunch on Master Billy.

‘Well done, he’s a beauty!’ screamed Mike. ‘Hurro, Captain! Bite him, Captain, give it him, boy!’ And bite he did with a vengeance. The brindled dog, although in evident and excessive pain, still kept his hold, and not even by the slightest whimper evidenced his suffering. At last, working all over the floor of the pit, the dogs got near the side, and Johnson's half-bred, feeling the woodwork with his feet, by a terrific effort succeeded in fairly twisting his opponent over. Next instant he regained his own feet, and then, loosing his grip, went direct for Billy's ear, got well hold, and began biting and tearing at that most wretched auricle in the most cruel fashion.

‘How about your stopping me in half an hour, now, my boy, eh?’ chuckled Mike, with a savage grin irradiating his ugly, dirt-grimed face.

‘Half-hour ain't up yet, Mike, you'll see what he'll do with you presently.’

This time the white dog had it all his own way, for he had Billy pinned so close to the head, and held with so much tenacity, that the other dog, though gamely trying at every opportunity to loose his unfortunate ear, could not shake him off, and thus the battle went on.

‘Heh ! Captain boy, shake him up,’ yelled Mike, in opposition to the frantic screams and shouts of encouragement from the opposite faction.

Both dogs seemed inclined to cease hostilities, so as to gain breathing time. Then each second left his corner, and eagerly watched them, waiting for an opportunity to pick them up. This, however, could only be done when each dog loosed his hold. They were evidently terribly exhausted from their severe exertions, and stood with drooping heads, the brindled with his tongue extended, and flanks heaving painfully with quick, short, gasping breathing, seemingly in somewhat worse condition than the other.

Suddenly ‘Time !’ screamed Mike, and quick as thought whipped up his dog, and, although the instant the brindle was loosed he made a rush at his antagonist, his second was too quick, and with his deformed hand caught him under the ribs, and carried him away to his corner.

Then every tongue was loosed—Round No. 1 had been fought—and of the *cognoscenti* each had a different idea of the merits of the animals. Expressions of those ideas were mingled with most horrible language, and shouts of ‘Beer !’ from thirsty men. The stench in the room from freely perspiring and very dirty specimens of human nature, mingled with foul tobacco smoke, the smell of the dogs, and the heat of the place, rendered it almost unbearable. Glad, however,

as Hubert and Dycer would have been to get quietly away, there was no chance of them doing so, for they were wedged tightly in by some dozen or so of men on all sides. Hubert whispered to Bob Johnson what his idea of things in general was, and intimated his intention to try to 'get out of it.' His friend advised him, however, with peculiar meaning in his tone, 'not to try it,' and hinted that any attempt on his part to leave at such a moment would not meet with particularly cordial recognition from those around.

Meantime, the seconds were both engaged in sponging the dogs with cold water, and washing out their mouths. Johnson's dog had been terribly punished, and bore evidence in an unmistakable manner of how cruelly Billy had held on to his shoulder, the limb being greatly swollen, the flesh torn and mangled, while the blood was running freely from the deep wounds made. It seemed, too, that while operating upon Billy's auricle he had managed to get 'tusk bound,' as it was called; *id est*, he had driven his own long fang clean through the flap of his upper lip. Mike, after trying vainly to draw the lip down, and off the tooth, coolly took out a pair of scissors from his pocket and cut the flesh completely through, thus releasing the poor wretch.

'Time!' was again called, and the dogs faced each other. This time the brindled dog had to come across to Captain's corner, and the instant he was loosed he flew across the pit and pinned the white dog at the same mauled spot upon the shoulder, and with his powerful jaws punished the poor brute most terribly. Game as a tiger, however, Captain made no sign, but getting well hold of his antagonist by the ear, and screwing himself round, he put his fore-feet against

Billy's body, and almost pulled the ear from its socket. So cruel was his grip, so intense the suffering caused by it, that the brindled dog released his hold, and although disdaining to cry out loudly, yet whimpered in sheer agony. Mike roared with delight, while offers of two and three to one on the white dog found no takers. Johnson's dog had taken instant advantage of the success he had gained, and had now got his opponent on to the floor of the pit. Every second he seemed to gather fresh strength—every moment to be biting the brindled dog deeper and deeper. To the most experienced eyes, even, it was patent that the unfortunate dog could not stand much more of such punishment. Captain stood with his feet planted firmly on his adversary's prostrate body. His jaws never relaxed their terrible grip. His powerful shoulders and back heaved every now and then in the intensity of his strength and resolution, and he seemed determined to put the matter beyond all doubt. Some ten minutes went by without the brindled dog making any effort to regain his feet, and it was then evident, although he tried gamely to reverse his misfortunes, that nature and vitality were both utterly exhausted, and that he had 'gone down' for good. This soon became so clear that the owner of Billy was loudly called upon by his friends to give in.

'Turn it up at once, the young 'un's too good for him,' cried half a dozen voices.

He at last, though unwillingly, assented, and the dogs were separated, although the instant that the brindle was released from Captain's grip, and even while being taken away by his second, he made futile attempts to get back to renew the battle. Both dogs were terribly punished, and the old adage

that 'youth will be served' had held good again in this case. Johnson's dog had won, it was true, but it was simply through superior stamina and greater muscular power, and not by any means through any want of pluck on his opponent's part. Heartily thankful was Hubert, at least, that it was over. In a few moments, to his unbounded delight, the pit was taken to pieces, the floor washed, and the windows being thrown wide open, he could breathe with something like freedom.

'Hany horders, gents?' was now the constant cry of the potboy. The majority seemed intent upon settling down and finishing a real jolly night of it. Johnson and his friends, together with some dozen of the more aristocratic portion of the gathering, by common consent, moved downstairs into the landlord's private *sanctum*. Arrived at which happy termination of the long, dark passage, many moments had hardly elapsed before each man, by way of clearing his throat, and washing some of the accumulated nausea away, had his nose buried deep in a foaming beaker. Very shortly afterwards Mike brought in Johnson's dog under his arm, after having washed him, and it was pitiable to see the state in which the animal was. His head was shockingly swollen, his feet and legs as well, and he could barely crawl to the fire, in front of which he curled himself up and lay down. Soon after the potboy brought in a large box filled with straw, and instantly raising his weary head at a chirp from Mike, he crept in, and again curled himself up.

'Well, guv'nor,' said this worthy, after giving an approving pat on the animal's head, 'I think as he's the gamest young 'un as I ever handled in my born days, an' I shouldn't



wonder as you're got a champion in him. Fights just like his father did, and goes to the same places. Ah! and old Bristle, that dog's father, was the gamest as ever crawled, bar none!' Then Mike, as he took his seat beside Hubert on the sofa, immediately afterwards, and in an overwhelming burst of confidence, assured that gentleman 'that the dog was the quickest "dummy killer" as he ever see.' Hubert quietly hinted to his friend Mike that the expression was somewhat new and vague to him, upon which touching exhibition of innocence the trainer smiled compassionately. He informed him, however, that when a young 'un is being brought up to fighting, and before he is put to the real thing, to give him confidence like, cur dogs are caught in the streets, and then taken to the trainer's drum, where, after being either muzzled or having had their mouths sewn up, the novice is excited by every means to bite and worry them, and that at last, his blood being fairly up, he deliberately turns round, and at last kills them.

'It's a deal o' trouble wi' some at first,' said Mike, in a manner which led Hubert to infer that he had suffered a good deal in this respect, 'for they won't bite 'em unless they show real fight. But arter they once kills one or two, they takes to it as kindly as suckin' eggs, bless yer! and then, yer see, we has to teach 'em the places to go for, yer see, which I meanter say, where they'll kill quickest, and when a dog once goes for a particular spot, he allus goes for it arterwards, just as yer see Captain, there, kept a-going for his dog's ear. Well, I taught him to—Good 'elth, sir,' and Mike took a tremendous pull at the pewter, and filling a very short and very black clay pipe, puffed solemnly.

‘Well, Berry, old man, I think we’ll be off,’ said Johnson, rising from his seat. ‘We have some distance to go, and it’s getting late, you know.’

‘Well, genelman, if you must, you must, though I’m sorry to lose your company. We’ve got a grand show o’ dawgs here next Sunday, and I hope you’ll come, and your friends as well. Jim, the coachman, shows his spannels, Sam Flimes a short-faced spannel, Jemmy Buggs a wonderful team of tarriers, and I’m a promised by a genelman in the City the grandest bulldog as has been seen for years. Tom, the Old Soldier, takes the cheer.’

‘Well,’ said Johnson, ‘if I can possibly come I will, although I don’t absolutely promise. Good-night.’

He was going through the bar when he turned back to tell Mike to take every care of Captain, and when he was completely recovered—not before—to bring him up to the barracks.

‘You’ll make yourself decent, of course, Mike. Here’s a couple of sovereigns for you.’

Directly afterwards he rejoined Hubert and Dycer, who were waiting outside the house.

A bright, round moon lit up the dismal squalidity of the street as they followed one another silently up the filthy thoroughfare. Hubert thought of the last moonlight adventure that he had had, when Lizzie had stood on the bridge with the moonbeams shimmering down upon her fair head and winsome face. Altogether he came to the conclusion that of the two he preferred the bridge business to any number of evenings spent with the ‘fancy.’ Perhaps, so far as the poetry of the thing was concerned, he was not far out

in his judgment. In any event, he mentally resolved that his first experience should also be his last. At the top of the street the lamps from the brougham glittered bright in the gloom. Five minutes afterwards they were inside the vehicle, and bowling rapidly westwards.

‘Well, Hubert, old fellow, what did you think of it all?’ asked Johnson. ‘Rattling little dog, isn’t he?’

‘Yes, the dog’s all right enough. As game as a pebble, I should say; but if ever you catch me rubbing shoulders with the “fancy” again—well, you may tell me of the occurrence. Faugh! what a horde of brute beasts! I shall never feel clean again, I really believe. How the devil you, Bob, can spend so much time with such a swarm of dirty demons, heaven only knows, for I don’t.’

Johnson laughed heartily at the other’s apparently horrified manner, saying presently, however, ‘Then, I take it, you won’t go again, *très cher*?’

‘By heaven, no! Ten consecutive warm baths won’t put me straight again. Still, I am glad that I have been, on the same principle that I rejoice at having seen a man hung in England, garotted in Spain, and having borne the infliction of the Cattle Show—all of them being things that don’t call for a second edition. From any other point of view, no thank you.’

‘Prefers to spend his evenings in gentle dalliance over a heaving bosom, and by the light of a rose-coloured lamp in the conservatory, eh!’ drawled Dycer, twisting his moustache.

‘I do, by many chalks,’ assented Hubert. ‘Hanged if I don’t know whether I should not prefer an evening at Tothill

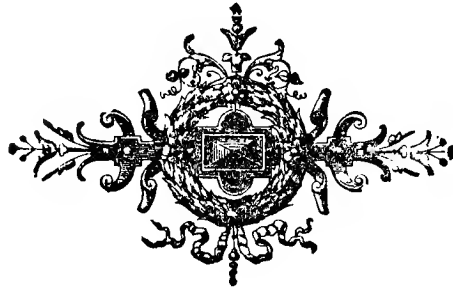
Fields or Pentonville picking oakum to another with the "fancy." There was a gentleman at my back, and if his face and neck had ever known soap and water for a month, I'll eat my head; and this sweet specimen of human nature, breathing the concentrated essence of forty ropes of onions, ten barrels of gin, and smelling a little worse than the foxes do at the Zoo, had his ambrosial whiskers mixed with my hair, and his reeking nose in my neck all the evening. There's delights for you, my children! Take Cecil Fitzfluke with you, dear Johnson, next time. He's going to have the Mayfair living, and if one could only get him to dress up some of the "fancy" business to suit the Mayfair palates it would be delicious; I'll venture to bet long odds that there would be such a stampede to save brands from the burning, City-road way, by the Park-lane "goodies," as would beat the gold-fields rush and Bouriaboola Gha into fits.'

'Bravo, Welford!' laughed Dycer. 'Send Berry to our friend when he wants a leg up, Bob. He'll very likely get it.'

'Oh! Berry, the landlord?' cried Hubert. 'There's another extraordinary thing! A little, round-faced, rosy, happy-eyed man like that being a big man at dog-fighting. Looks to me now as if his life had been spent in cultivating dahlias or tulips, his wildest notion of excitement tossing for two's of gin under a lamp-post on a Sunday morning. Bravo! Here's the Aluminium at last! Out you go, Dycer! My soul's in arms and eager for—Brown Windsor, and a warm bath!'

As soon as the men stood upon the pavement Hubert

went up the broad flight of steps three at a time, so much did he desire the association of soap and water. Dycer and Johnson, as old hands at the game, took matters rather more coolly. They had their bath, though, for all that.





## CHAPTER XXVII.

### AN AFTERNOON FOX.

IT was chill and foggy in the extreme when Biggs came with the captain's hot water the next morning. So miserably cheerless was the outlook when the valet drew the window-curtains aside and the blinds up, that for ten minutes the gallant officer lay snug in the warm blankets, telling himself over and over again that he was an arrant ass to go on such a fool's errand.

'What the devil do I want after this infernal woman after all?' he asked himself. 'I'm a fool, as sure as God made little apples, and shall very likely get bitten, like a trapped fly in a sugar-basin. 'Pon my soul, if it wasn't for paying that huge brute of a miller out—hang him for a splay-footed beast!—I would wash my hands of it all. I will wipe out my old score with him, though, in any event. Yes; if it wasn't for that,' he continued reflectively, 'hanged if I wouldn't turn the whole thing up at once. She's devilish nice and natty, I'll admit; and yet I've a suspicion, somehow, that one day she'll cut up rough. Well, let her; by that time I shall have played my game, and bowled the miller. I don't care a damn for many things in life, but I DO think if I could see that gentleman with his middle stump down, and both the bails gone to the devil, I'd

emulate that sly old thief Job, and ejaculate, with a good deal of unction, "Thank the Lord for all His mercies !" There's only one thing I should bar in the matter, whether the miller won or I, and that would be the sackcloth and ashes business afterwards. Anything in reason—But that ! No thank you. Biggs !

'Yessir.'

'Get me some more hot water. Can't stand cold baths in the latter end of December. Any letters?'

'Yessir.'

'Bring them in, then, you idiotic wireworm—you wretched apology for a man ; and get me some more hot water in two shakes.'

'Yessir,' and before Biggs closed the folding-doors leading into his master's bedroom he first took him his letters, and then, standing on the other side of the partition, went through a most vigorous pantomime, the chief feature in it being a tremendous onslaught made by himself upon the head of an imaginary individual who was supposed to have his cranium situated under the valet's arm, and to be carrying on existence in the position known amongst exponents of the noble art as being in Chancery.

So tremendously did he pummel and punch his shadowy foe, that the noise roused Hubert from his occupation, and slipping out of bed, he pushed the door gently open, just in time to see Biggs, with a final and tremendous upper-cut, completely rout and polish off his antagonist.

'Getting up an appetite for breakfast, Biggs, or a scene in an assault-at-arms. Which is it ?' said Hubert quietly.

'I—er, I—have been suffering with a most tremenjous

and extraordinary fit of the shivers this morning, sir,' said the valet in terrible confusion.

'Shivers !'

'Yes, shivers, and I was a trying to wipe 'em out. Hot water, sir? Yessir ! in less than the—er, the—er wink of a heyelid, sir.'

'Have you ever suffered from an attack of so violent a nature as that before, Biggs?' asked Hubert, with a strangely queer inflection of voice, when, in an incredibly short space of time, he was supplied with his hot water.

'No, sir ! can't say as I ever was.'

'Well, my friend, I would not let it occur again, if I were you. It's dangerous, Biggs—very dangerous. Shivers of so violent a nature will one day bring the house down about your ears. Not to mention a burning desire on my own part to have a little go in. You understand, Biggs. I'm sure to have a go in. Your attitude was perfect, Biggs ; perfect. Where did you learn sparring?'

'I wasn't, sir—er—sparrin', exactly. It was more a sort of roominating fit than anythink else.'

'Ah, well ! when you are taken in that way again, just let me know, Biggs, will you? I've got an infallible remedy, and we'll "roominate" together, Biggs. An infallible remedy, Biggs ; and it's at your service, Biggs.'

Thus Hubert, with a fund of imperturbable good-humour. He had a very strong suspicion that his own head had been in the valet's mind at the time when the little pantomime had been enacted. Perhaps he was not far wrong, either. Let it be said, however, to Biggs's credit, that he never suffered in his master's vicinity in the future,



As soon as he had finished his breakfast the captain sent for a hansom, had his portmanteau put safely on the roof, and bowled away to the Great Northern. He timed his arrival at the big station admirably, caught the 10.15 express, and early in the wintry afternoon found himself standing outside the little station at Alcaston, which, lying high up, overlooked the whole glorious valley of the Swash, with its silver gleaming tide shining between the gaunt, leafless trees and clumps of underwood. The quiet, silent little town lay at his feet, the smoke ascending in blue wreaths against the dark background of giant timber and woodland copse, hanging in a light, silvery blue haze over the peaceful scene, until it gradually drifted before a slight breeze, becoming lost directly amongst the distant tree-tops, where the wood-pigeons built their nests.

The porter had brought Hubert's portmanteau outside. The train, with a sudden, spiteful scream, had again started, and was now winding its way down the gentle slope of the hills, its white puffs of steam shooting up, and hanging in heavy clouds of vapour, tinged rosy red with the grand wintry sun, just then glowing like a fiery ball in the clear gray sky. For one moment Hubert stood silently looking on at the still beauty of the scene, hardly noticing that upon the high road leading into the town, from which the open country stretched away on either hand, groups of foot-people were standing, amongst whom a few horsemen, with now and again people in carriages, were apparently waiting for some anticipated pleasure.

So deep was he immersed in thought, that twice Paddy Rafferty, the bandy-legged Irish ostler who drove the little

single-horsed omnibus from the George, had addressed him, asking whether he wanted his 'portmanchy' taken down.

'Hah! Pat, is that you, my boy? I was in a brown study. What is going on here to-day?'

'Arrah, captin! Ye're out of a big thing, me jewel, the day. They've got the hounds out. They had the divole of a spankin' grate run this mornin', and now they're thrying for an afternoon fox beyond the wood yonder, in the big fuz patch. See, yonder's Tom Melly, the fust whip, at the corner of the wood.'

Even as he looked, Hubert caught the low distant whimpering of the hounds in covert. Barely noticeable to any but a sportsman's ear, for it was but a single wailing note or two borne on the wings of the wind. To Hubert, however, who had had many a gallant run with those identical hounds, at a time when he was a welcome guest at his brother's house, the sound was as familiar as the squeak of a violin in an orchestra. Indeed, he half thought, in the mellow long-drawn 'yowl' that reached his ears from the vicinity of the great gorse cover, that he could distinguish the voice of Harbinger, a rare old badger-pied hound, always the first to potter out the line on a bad scent, and one that, flashing through a covert at a seeming great pace, yet never left a yard untried.

'Who's out to-day, Paddy?' asked Hubert listlessly, as the man returned after storing away the captain's 'portmanchy' and hat-box.

'Arrah! there's a biggish field, captin. I saw your brother—God rest him for a gallant jontleman!—come through the town with Mester Morton. Yonder's his pretty lady-faced

wife, see. She's dhrivin' thim brown pownies o' hers the day Swate bits o' powny-flesh they are, too. And there's the colonel out, and Captain Pugsty from the Hollies; both the young madams are mounted in a fashion, too. By the howly toe of St. Patrick! yonder's the fox!—see, at the corner of the little wood, and Tom Melly does na see him!

The next instant the bandy-legged ostler, with his eyes blazing with excitement, put his hands up to his mouth, and screamed like a maniac, until the old broken-winded horse in the omnibus forgot all about his nosebag, and pricked his ears and stamped his forefoot under the charm of Pat's scream.

'Talliho, Tom! Tally-ho! Gone away—gone awa-ay!' screamed Paddy, with his eyes half out of his head.

Tom Melly, sitting like a stone statue at the corner of the wood, pricked up his ears at the single shrill cry. Hounds were still in covert, although working fast towards the point where the white-tagged rascal had slipped them. He had bolted clean through the little wood at the corner of which Tom, the first whip, sat.

This wood crowned the vale at the foot of which the Swash churned and dimpled, hiding the field and the huntsman from Hubert's point of view. The gorse itself lay between the little belt of timber and the river. The people grouped in the road could see all the operations. Hubert, from the station-yard, could see only the whip, as he sat his spanking bay mare at the corner, doubtless with every one of his keen senses and nerves strained and on the *qui vive*, taking in all the movements of the hounds in the gorse and the outlying wood.

'They must be running another fox in the wood, Paddy,' said Hubert, with every one of his ten fingers and toes kindling.

'Nay; that's old Timothy—artful old dodger. I knew'd him by his big white tag. He's served 'em just like it before. He runs a ring full pelt round the wood, the divole; and the minute thim hounds gets in the goss—thunderin' blazes!—he slips 'em at the further end. If they haven't got a burnin' scent they'll lose him again. Blazes and blue brimstone light on that Tom Melly! Tom, avick! Is it deaf as a post ye are, Tom, darlint? Talliho, Tom! Talliho! Forrard, away!'

This time Tom woke up, and, spurring the bay mare, sent her slap at the low wattle fence that bounded the pasture. The bright sun shone out and lit up the dull green slope of the grass land on ahead. Tom strained his eyes up the slope. A flock of sheep had their heads up, evidently watching something. Next Tom caught the trail of the white tag, as the fox crept up the hill under cover of the hedge, and, banging the spurs in, he got hold of his mare's head, and sent her full gallop across the grass.

Twang, twang, twang! In an instant Tom's mellow horn sounded shrill and clear upon the still air of the wintry afternoon. There was a bustle among the foot-people, because the horn meant something, and an instant afterwards a big black-and-tan-pied hound leaped over the low fence bounding the wood, followed by two or three ramping devils, directly afterwards, every one of them instantly catching the excitement and feathering over the grass.

'Yoick forrard!' screamed Tom, as he caught old Playful's

long-drawn cry. He knew the next second that she had hit the scent, and he screeched his hardest. 'Forrard away! Forrard away! Yoick over, Caroline! Get forrard, good hounds! Yoi, into him! Pash him up, Driver!' Barely had he finished his scream, before Tom had a sea of lashing sterns and bristling hackles round his horse's heels. Playful was a hundred yards in front, and, gently pushing the bay mare through, the whip took off his cap, and gave one more ear-piercing shout that sent every dog and bitch half crazy. Then they all owned to it, with a chorus of joyful melody that rang out like a peal of bells on the clear air. One more twang of the horn, and smacking his whip after the last of the youngsters, Tom crammed his cap down, and sent his bay slap at the big thorny hedge. Directly afterwards the wood was alive. Men were seen popping through a gap here and there, while many a crash told of a fence smashed through or hurdle sent to ruin. The last of the skirter poured out, and two men stole away after Tom Melly, as hard as their horses could go up the gentle slope. One was a thin, lean-limbed man, all wire and whipcord, boasting as well but of one eye. He was mounted on a powerful handsome grey. If you please, that was Tom Bunce, the huntsman, and one of the best in England. Wiry and wrinkled, grey of thatch, on foot nothing to talk about, on a horse's back the very picture of what a huntsman should be. Put him down on a pavement in a broad handsome street, and you would not have given a penny bun for him. Up on The Robber he looked to be worth half as much as the Bank of England.

The other man, mounted on a great powerful chestnut that

threw the clods high in the air as he galloped, and who sat his horse as though his legs had been moulded to the very saddle, was George Welford. Him Hubert knew in an instant, long before Paddy had directed his attention to the stalwart, well-mounted figure. Then came Joe on the bay ; Colonel Lascelles, on a great, hot-blooded, tearing animal ; a crowd of people of whom nobody wants to know anything at all about, and lastly the two young ladies, with their father, the gallant Pugsby, the latter mounted on a horse whose destination clearly should have been a circus instead of the hunting-field—a cream-coloured animal, with arched neck, prancing gait, and a tail down to his hocks.

Then away they all went, tearing up the opposite grass slopes, the hounds by this time carrying a splendid head ; the fox—artful old vagabond !—with his mask pointed straight for the earths at Burbly Beeches.

‘Well, Paddy,’ said Hubert, turning to the ostler with a lowering brow and a thundercloud in his eyes, ‘I suppose we’ve seen all that there is to be seen, so you may drive me on. I wrote to Mrs. Merrick two days ago, telling her that I was coming down, so I suppose they’ll give me my old room.’

‘Yis, captin ; I heard the missus telling the girl on it this morning ; so if you’ll jump up I’ll rattle you down in a jiffy.’

Five minutes afterwards the captain was plodding along at the best pace the poor old horse could get up, past the spot where Tom Melly had lately sat his horse. All was still now as the grave, save that the magpies were yet flitting uneasily from bough to bough in the tall spruce and firs,

doubtless wondering what on earth that crowd of idiots had wanted just now, who seemed from their point of view to turn the silent grove into a raging hell. Ten—twelve minutes afterwards, the omnibus pulled up at the low, dark porch which masked the entrance to the long passage leading to the George's coffee-room. In that highly respectable, gloomy, and quiet apartment the George's William still officiated as the attendant high-priest, looking as though he had never had his clothes off, or his white tie untied, since the day upon which he supplied Tatham with his 'gin warm.' It is just open to argument whether he ever had.

There he stood, in front of a roaring, blazing fire, calmly rubbing his fat, soft palms one within the other. Thus, when Hubert, on his way to his own room, stopped at the coffee-room door, William's face straightway became a perfect map or network of crossings and creasings, the lines spreading all over the fat, pasty features. It was his way of smiling a welcome. The face creased, yet exhibited no symptom of jocularity. No one ever heard him laugh; yet none the less, when the creasings had got into their wonted places, had subsided somewhere in an indefinite fashion, very much as ripples do on the surface of a pond when a boy flings a stone in, those who knew William best knew that he had smiled.

'Captain Hubert Welford,' he began, in oily tones. 'Ahem!—a very fine afternoon, sir, for the time of year. Much gaiety in the vast metropolis, sir? Ah, yes, I presume so. You astonished me, sir, when you came in—you did, indeed. I should just as soon have thought of seeing His Royal Highness the Dook of Wellington.'

‘Astonished you, eh, William? Well, I dare say I did. I suppose, because you knew that I had had a bit of a tiff with my brother—my Lord High and Mighty, yonder—you thought I should be ashamed to show my face in Alcaston again, eh?’

‘No, dord barn it, captain, don’t put it on that ground!’ cried William deprecatingly. ‘But I should ha’ most thought that, as everybody in the village knows that that lad Patsy was laid up for a week with a cut over the temple, done with a stick, and by a gentleman as holds Her Majesty’s commission, why——’

‘Served the infernal scoundrel right, William!—served him right! You don’t know what a scurvy trick he played me. He brought on all that bother between my brother and me. Served him right, I say!’

‘Well, captain, you may be right; I’m no judge—except of wine or brandy and water; but I’d strongly advise you,’ he said impressively, ‘not to let Tatham hear your version, because he has another, very much more contrary-wise; and on my sollum davy—meaning no offence, captain—but the folks hereabouts say that they’ve usually found Tatham right.’

‘You’re a parcel of canting scoundrels, the whole crew of you! As for that old Tatham, how my brother can put up with his insolence I cannot make out. Phew! how hot this room is—I wish to heaven you’d let sleeping dogs lie, William. Hark! what noise is that?’

‘It sounds to me like a number of people a’ horseback coming up the street,’ replied William, crossing to the window. ‘Ah, yes, it’s the hunting gentlemen coming back,



after killing their second fox ; and here is your brother, captain, just a coming in. You'll see him, of course ?

'No ; I'm going straight to my room, William—my private room, recollect—I don't want my brother to know that I am here. Serve my dinner upstairs, if you please.'

Next instant he was gone, while his brother, Lascelles, Pugsby, Joe Morton, and Monckton, all save the latter, and simply because he hadn't been out, splashed and stained up to the very eyebrows, entered the room.

'Four brandies and a whisky, William,' cried George, from the identical place on the hearthrug upon which, five minutes before, his brother had been standing.

'Coming, sir, directly.'

'Well,' said George, holding his brandy up to the gas-light, 'here's "Foxhunting," colonel ! What an artful vagabond our afternoon fox was to be sure ! Got to earth at last.'

'Yes,' assented the colonel. 'But if we'd been five minutes' sooner, the boot might have been on the other leg.'

William, from his quiet snuggery amongst the bottles and tumblers, thought if the sportsmen had been five minutes' sooner on entering the room they would have had the pleasure of running another fox to earth. Between ourselves, he almost wished they had.

'Doctor,' said Morton, drawing Monckton on one side, in an interval of general conversation, 'I wish you'd run over to my place some morning. I'm not half satisfied with my wife's health.'

'What's the matter, my friend ? Your wife—ah ! yes, a fine handsome girl ; I recollect her. Nothing much the matter, I should fancy. Liver out of order—blue pill and

black draught ; leave off beer for a day or two, slops, broth, beef-tea, rice pudding, no strong tea, and so on.'

'I hardly think you've hit it, doctor. I think her bodily health is good enough, but she's low-spirited, mopes like, eats little or nothing, and somehow I fancy she's losing flesh.

'Ah ! want of tone. A tonic will put her right at once. A little bark—hum, yes !—Tinc. Col., and so on. I'll run over to-morrow.'

'That's precisely what I wanted to avoid, doctor. I've been begging her to see you for the last fortnight, for I'm certain she's not well, but nothing on earth will move her. She's a will of her own, you know, and refuses to see you, insisting that there is nothing the matter with her.'

'Well, my dear fellow, and she's very likely right. Women are kittle cattle. Take her home a new bonnet, done up in about fifty pieces of paper. I'll bet you a little odds that works wonders. I mean, you know, the process of unwrapping the rubbish.'

Joe shook his handsome head, his good-humoured face slightly clouding as he smiled his answer, 'You don't know her, doctor, believe me.'

'Well, what am I to do, then, my dear fellow? If I drive over professionally the lady won't see me. Sitting at the garret window, like Lady Anne, she sees me coming, and takes instant advantage of locks, bolts, and bars, which, as a rule, don't soon fly asunder. We can't assault the lady's bower door with dynamite, nor discharge a pistol in the lock. Can you get her to come in and see me?'

Again the doctor's auditor shook his head, and this time

a little more dismally than before. Before he could reply, Monckton put in a query to this effect—

‘How about the boy? Anything that I could see him about, as a means of paving the way? Measles or whooping-cough, thrush, teething business, or anything in that line?’

‘My dear sir,’ and this time Joe’s face beamed, ‘you’ve literally no idea what a jolly little cock he is—bless his bonny face!—and he’s as handsome as a picture!’

‘So he ought to be, with such a sire and dam,’ said Monckton, ‘or else breeding for points is all my left eye and Elizabeth Martin.’

‘I tell you what, doctor!’ exclaimed Joe at last, excitedly. ‘I know you’re fond of fishing, and so am I. It’s an age since I had a rod in my hand. The deeps along the Home Meads are chock full of pike, and I can get plenty of bait. Now, will you come over to-morrow, and have a day? It looks like being fine—you’ll dine with me afterwards, of course—and then you can form your own opinion.’

‘Dash my buttons!’ cried Monckton, in a fever at once. ‘Eternally dash every button that I possess. By gad! I haven’t killed a pike since last winter, and then I had a day in the Hall Mere. Let’s see—Brown’s babies! Bother Brown’s babies. The devil fly away with Brown’s babies! *Summum jus summa injuria*. How abominably that bit of classics applies to me in connection with pike fishing. Old Mrs. Medley’s is the worst case. Hum, I’ll see her first in the morning. Brown’s imps?—ah, yes—lashins of saffron tea’s the thing. Send Pinder over to see ’em. My dear sir—*quocunque trahunt Fata, sequamur*, hath somebody

or other, which being translated freely means—"Wherever the Fates direct, let us follow," and as the Fates clearly direct me to kill sundry pike to-morrow, I'll be with you at eleven.'

'Good! then that is settled; and I'm very pleased,' said Joe simply, as they rejoined the group at the fire.

'Never got gout coming on yet, Morton, have you?' said George, as the two drew up.

'No, Mr. Welford. Thank goodness, so far I'm sound in wind and limb. But Dr. Monckton is coming over to-morrow for some pike fishing. I need hardly say how glad I shall be if you will join us.'

'I should spoil everything, my dear fellow. I am a shocking bad hand with the rod. Besides, I have a good deal of business with Tatham to-morrow.'

'Pike fishing!' said Pugsty, meditatively. 'Ha—that—ha—reminds me that at the mouth of a tremendous torrent running into the bund at Mudgerigow I hooked a—ha—monster mahseer!—ha—and by the Lord Harry, sir!—'

'Oh, we know all about it, captain,' said Lascelles, with a sneer. 'Heard it a thousand times. You were spinning with a deceased Hindoo baby or a tomcat for a bait—which was it, for I forget?—and this fellow ran you out three thousand yards of line, went clean over a cataract, and up a tremendous fall. You ran seven miles after him, lost three stone in weight, and at last gaffed him in the pool above; and, by the Lord Harry, sir, he kept the cantonment going on mahseer steaks for a month.'

'Colonel Lascelles,' said Pugsty, slowly and impressively,

‘this is—ha—beyond a joke ; and I say emphatically—ha—yes, sir, emphatically—that your tone and manner are far from being gentlemanly—very far from it, indeed. I wish you a very good-night, gentlemen.’

‘Really, Lascelles,’ said Welford, after the unhappy little man had left the room, ‘you are too hard upon poor Pugsty. He’s not half a bad fellow ; his worst fault is pulling the long bow a little.’

‘I know it, Welford ; but I hold that women with spiteful, bitter tongues, and men who systematically tell lies, are both of them institutions that want wiping out. If I had my way, I’d confine all the strong-minded women and shrews, together with the lady authoresses who make adultery a virtue, and pander to prostitution barefacedly, in one vast building, where they could not possibly set anybody else but their fellows by the ears, or teach them vile doctrines save in a sphere where it couldn’t do harm. As for liars, I’d smother ’em !’

‘What a treat for the keepers of a hospital where women with debauched minds, or those of a masculine turn, were confined, eh !’ said George, with a laugh. ‘Come, it’s getting late. Will you cut your mutton with me, colonel ? Do ; I’m very glad. Good-night, Monckton ; Morton, good-night !’ A shuffling of feet ensued as the party broke up, and very soon afterwards the only noise heard was that of the soft drip, drip of water, as William washed the empty glasses and put them in the rack.





## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

IT was one of those bright, crisp mornings occasionally vouchsafed to the wretched dwellers in this land of gloom and fog, which just saves an English winter from the stigma of being a period in which it is impossible to exist. We have many such, it may be thankfully admitted, and, while it is just on the cards that many thousands of sufferers from weakly chests and badly arranged lungs would give half they possess to get away from the sharp, nipping frost and bitter cold winds of home, to balmy breezes and a blue Italian sky, there are just as many sturdy men and strapping broad-chested lasses, in the 'tight little island,' who would not give a dump for the change.

True, the keen westerly wind whistled sharp round exposed corners, whirling dead leaves, bits of straw and paper, and all the *débris* of even such tidy streets as those of Alcaston into unsightly heaps. True that a hedger and ditcher, whose theatre of operations was a bleak wood, and who was busy with his sharp blade amongst the decaying wood in the hedge bottoms, had a rheumy and watery look about his pale blue eyes that told of a true bill, from his point of view,

against the shrewdly nipping qualities of the blast as it hustled across the open moorland. Equally true that the sheep were huddled confusedly together under the lee of a friendly hedge, where flocks of starlings were busily occupied round their feet or grubbing in the folds of their thick, wintry fleeces. Every now and again a quick eye might perhaps have observed a woman popping out from one of the little, homely, thatched domiciles, half cottage, half house, which formed the greater part of the village. She went bustling past the George windows, with her apron round her head, bound on an errand whose object was likely enough to get two ounces of black tea from worthy Jabez Ardron's shop. If not that, it was to give a final motherly shake to a round, chubby-faced lad in a clean pinafore, with a Scotch cap surmounting a tawny thatch, who stood half sullenly at the nearest corner on his way to 'skule,' a tear in his eye, and more than half a look of 'playing the wag' about his *tout ensemble*. All this was true, doubtless; but it mattered not a jot to jolly old Monckton as he rattled through the quiet streets of the little town, his old mare's newly-roughed feet clanking on the hard ground, quaintly paved with even, round, knubbly stones, on his way to sickly Mrs. Medley's bedside. The wind puffed the mare's mane out, and she tossed her brown head as it whistled in her eyes. Her driver, with his knees well covered up, chuckled until his red cheeks were blown out like pink balls, as he thought of how this jolly wind would start the pike from the rushes and send them like roaring lions through the choppy water seeking whom they could devour. 'C—c—k, c—c—k,' he chirruped to his mare, and, laying the lash as gently on brown

Molly's fat flank as he would have thrown a yellow Sally to a feeding trout, he trotted gaily on.

Still less did it matter to the George's William, who, standing at the coffee-room window, stared across the deserted street. There was a blazing fire in the room, the air was dry and warm, and William had just despatched a marvellous platter of eggs and bacon very satisfactorily indeed.

To Hubert Welford, however, who came down from his bedroom chilly and out of sorts, ill-tempered into the bargain, and suffering from the effects of more than one tumbler of brandy and water too much overnight, it mattered a very great deal. His first act was to bang the poker savagely amongst the blazing coals, upsetting no small quantity in the fireplace, an act which had the effect of bringing William shuffling from his den, to which he had retreated just before the captain's advent. If there *was* one thing that annoyed William more than another it was to see anyone meddling with his fire.

'Good-mornin', sir,' he said curtly, as he carefully replaced the coals with the tongs. 'You'd doubtless like your breakfuss in your hown room?'

'No, I'll breakfast here,' growled Hubert. 'You seem to be very much interested in building that fire up—get me a soda and brandy, will you?'

'In one moment, sir. This was a wonderful good fire until you broke it up in this fashion. Fire requires humour-some treatment, sir.'

'Hang the fire, and you too! Get me my lotion, will you, or shall I ring? By George, if I do, I'll wake some of you up, I promise you.'



‘Hoh, there’s not the least necessity, captain. I’m here to attend to casual customers, and I attends to ’em—in *their order*. There’s a gentleman in the further box there, as has ordered three-penn’orth of rum and milk—a very old customer, indeed—after him, captain, delighted to do your bidding,’ and as he finished William whisked a trifling matter of dust from a Great Western time-table, and straightway his face became a mass of creases. This smile denoted that he thought in his own mind that he had trumped the captain’s trick.

For less than such a trifle as two pins, Hubert would have rung the bell with such violence as would have brought in half the household, alarmed at such an extraordinary peal. With the recollection, however, that he was not altogether popular with the indwellers, he came to the conclusion that it would be politic, perhaps, to wait, and curse the tardy William heartily to himself. This he did in good, round fashion, which would not have disgraced the purlieu of Wapping or the Dials. In due course his morning draught was placed before him.

‘Did I not hear Monckton’s voice last night, William?’ he asked later on, as under the mollifying influence of good coffee, kidneys done to perfection, dry toast, and Scotch marmalade, his sulkiness yielded, and the natural charm and grace of his manner prevailed.

The question was put in such a tone of graciousness, that William hauled down his fighting flag at once, and surrendered at discretion.

‘Puffectly right, captain,’ answered the waiter, coming forward from his den. ‘The doctor was here with your

brother, Captain Pugsty, Colonel Lascelles, and Mr. Morton. In point o' fact, the doctor druv by not ten minutes before you was down. Nothing wrong, I hope?'

'Oh no, thanks—I felt sure of the voice, though. Very early, isn't he, the doctor?'

'Ah, sir!' answered William, with a pitying air, 'it ain't physic, it's fishing brings *him* out so early. I never see such a man. What on earth any human being can see in a stickin' themselves by a nasty, foggy river, with a wind like this, too, a blowin', and watchin' a beggarly float bob about, I can't make out.'

'Not bad fun, take my word for it, if the pike feed. I suppose he's going up to my brother's?'

'I think not; indeed, I am sure not. He's going to Mr. Morton's top piece—the Home Meads they calls it. Mr. Morton's going along with him, to fish the day through, and I'm sure I hope they'll enjoy themselves.'

'The devil he is!' said Hubert, quietly to himself. 'Why, that Home Mead, if I recollect rightly, is a mile or more from the Mill, William, is it not?' he queried in a somewhat higher key.

'Full that, sir—full that!'

'Hah—I should hardly have thought now,' he added, carelessly, 'that old Monckton would have cared for such a tramp.'

'Gor' Amighty, sir! Why he'd tramp from one end of the county to the other for a day's fishing. I've heard him, I assure you, talk hisself hoarse in this very room, along with old Mr. Cocksedge—who used to be a great hand hisself I've heard say—as to whether the body or the wing, or some-

thing, of a green duck—nay, drake it was—should be pale yaller, green, or yaller, green, and grey mixed.’

‘Ah! and I suppose,’ said Hubert, as he lit a cigar and blew a long, thin trail of smoke ceilingwards, ‘the infernal old twaddlers haven’t settled the question to this day, eh, William?’

‘No, sir!’ said William, his face a network of creasings, and delighted to think that he was really amusing the captain with his chat, ‘I really don’t think they have.’

‘Exactly, and as sure as you stand there a living man, they never will!’ and without another word the captain, with his cigar in full blast, rose and left the room.

To say that William was disappointed, as he went back to his snugery, is not perhaps the full measure of his discontent. He was disgusted, and just as he was beginning to enjoy himself before the fire, too, he reflected. As for the gallant Hubert, he thought what a lucky chance it was for him—this fishing business—just when he was at his wits’ end how to get audience of a certain fair dame of our acquaintance, and tell her that by the end of the week at the very latest he must be off, or the whole tribe of Moss, Abrahams, and Jacobs—in fact, every infernal hook-nosed Jew in London—would be down upon him like vultures on a dying horse.

Leaving our friend Hubert proceeding slowly and contentedly up the wide oaken staircase on his way to his bedroom, it may be as well to follow the man who some little time ago drove Brown Molly through the knubbly-paved streets.

Suppose we pick him up again where he stands, drawing on his stout dogskin driving-gloves, at old Mrs. Medley’s

gate, giving final directions, the while he lifts up the brown mare's fore-foot to see if by any chance she has picked up a pebble, to the old lady's fair-haired granddaughter.

'Then you don't think she'll want anything else, doctor?' queried the girl.

'Nothing in the world, my dear—she's going on famously. Beef-tea and barley-water, with a dash of lemon in it—barley-water and beef-tea. The pill at night—mixture in the morning. Keep her snug and quiet. Good-bye, my dear.'

And he jumped nimbly up, buckled the apron tight, chirped to Brown Molly, and pounded down the lane as hard as Brown Molly's legs could go, never drawing rein until, twenty minutes afterwards, he pulled up at the door of Littlewash Mill Farm, where stalwart Joe stood awaiting him. As soon as Monckton had got his rod and tackle out, Joe hurried the mare off, in the care of a lad, to a warm stall, while he insisted on the doctor coming in to have a snack of pork-pie, a bit of rare ripe cheese, and a tumbler of still riper ale, before they started.

Joe led the way up a wide passage paved with bright red bricks, washed as clean as brush and water, wielded by strong arms, could make them—a passage whose ceiling was dim with age, and having ponderous beams of heavy timber crossing it—until he reached a low door with curious iron hinges stretching half across its width, at which he had to stoop his head humbly, so as to escape a crack on the sconce from its massive portal. Two steps led down into a room below the level of the passage. An old-fashioned screen, covered completely with chintz flowers, cut out and carefully grouped, served to keep the draught away from the interior

of the apartment, and, rounding this screen in two steps, Joe pushed it back, so as to let the light stream across to where the doctor waited, and then the host stood with an air of quiet dignity, which sat well upon his grandly massive frame, as though he were ushering his guest into a palace instead of a kitchen, and quite prepared to do all the honours of Littlewash Mill nobly.

Generations of Mortons had sat in this very room, and there was a curious mixture of relics of old-world life and frippery of a more modern order, which told purely and distinctly two very different tales. Stiff, solid, and angular, a heavy black oaken clothes-press stood at one side of the room, and this single piece of furniture, with its bright brass lacquer work and wide deep drawers, in which a family of children might have lain hidden, had a distinct and entire individuality of its own. And so with two sets of hanging shelves, hung one on each side of the grim old clothes-press, and full of curiously-covered and fearfully ugly-patterned pieces of china. These plates and dishes, cups and saucers, chipped and starred, cracked and mended in a hundred ways, and *as* plates and dishes not worth fourpence, were priceless in Morton's eyes, for they reminded him of generations of his forefathers dead and gone, traditions of whose doughty deeds had descended from father to son, and been treasured with an extraordinary feeling of pride. One villainously ugly plate, with a pattern of a rampant dragon in blue and crimson, and upon which Joe set special store, was said to have been the identical platter placed before a hunted and afterwards murdered king, by a loyal Morton, who bent the knee humbly in serving and waiting upon the

fallen monarch, not many hours before a party of Cromwell's hypocritical, snuffing dragoons, with cropped heads like prize-fighters or convicts, rode up hot foot, with smoking horses and thirsty throats, desperately eager to lay their ungodly, filthy hands upon the man of Belial, as they called the unhappy, crushed scion of the royal house of Stuart.

On the walls some terribly ugly oil paintings hung, principally of sporting scenes, where the men, horses, and dogs, trees, and running water all alike, seemed as though they had been carved out of wood, so utterly incapable was the artist—whoever he might have been—of conveying the slightest degree or notion of motion. Then there were portraits of stolid, fat cattle, with dewlaps almost sweeping the ground, and pigs in an abominable state of obesity. In direct and entire opposition to these were some beautiful examples of a modern school of painters in water-colour, who could absolutely make trees appear as though the wind was rustling the foliage, or a brook as though it were really plashing and foaming between lichen-fringed rocks. These latter seemed to chatter garrulously of their mistress, blue-eyed, handsome Lizzie, in an instant, much as did the tall, ornamental flower-stands, filled with choicest blossoms, peeping out from the crimson drapery and lace curtains, appointments which seemed utterly out of place in the quaint old-fashioned window seats.

On one side of the fireplace stood a magnificently ancient chair, with a high carved back. It was constructed of oak and walnut, and from the action of the past time of countless ages, since it was first turned out of the craftsman's hand who so cunningly fashioned it, the wood had attained a

beautiful dark shade and a wondrous polish. Over the back of this chair was thrown a badger's skin, with its long soft hair. This, of course, was Joe's, and on the opposite side of the fireplace an exquisitely beautiful low rocking-chair, rich in carved work and gilt flutings, with a soft crimson cushion, marked where Lizzie sat—when she chose to sit at all—in what had originally been the kitchen, but which she now called 'the morning-room.' Blue Dutch tiles, curiously figured, formed a panelling in the interior of the wide-throated chimney-piece. The ceiling, blackened with age and disfigured, possibly (in the eyes of folks who were over nice), by huge beams of worm-eaten timber, crossing and re-crossing at various points, held suspended from great flat-headed nails driven into the joists, nets filled with lemons or packets of choice seeds. Next came huge flitches of bacon, and fat, podgy, comfortable-looking hams, which seemed to promise succulent dishes when the peas were green. These were hung in wooden racks, while below the ponderous beams, and suspended by stout straps, were two or three guns. One of these was a dreadfully ancient-looking specimen, with a long, thin barrel and flint and steel lock, about which Joe had always a terrible tale to tell concerning a band of ruffians who once tried to take the old mill by storm, and of his great-grandfather potting them one by one from the mill windows with this long, thin barrel, just like so many sheep.

A snowy cloth upon a centre table was nearly covered with an ample, yet homely, luncheon, and the doctor, always ready with his hearty appetite for a snack, was soon discussing a slice of savoury pie, its interstices filled with rich appetizing jelly.

‘How about those bait?’ said he, with his mouth full.

‘I daresay I’ve got four dozen,’ replied Joe, in a mumbling manner, because it happened that his own jaws were similarly employed; adding, after he had tossed off a glass of the beady ale—‘beauties.’

‘Dace or roach?’ was Monckton’s next query.

‘Dace, every one—some of them close upon half-pounders; and I think, with this wind, we shall have some fun. At least, I hope and pray we may.’

‘Amen!’ said the doctor piously; and then, as he helped himself to a crusty corner of the loaf, brown and crispy, together with a slice of the fat, yellow cheese, he added, ‘and the missus—where is she?’

‘In bed, my good sir. She never gets down until close upon twelve.’

‘Then, my dear fellow, there’s an end of the mystery at once. It’s a case of too much pillow. Rout her out, my lad! Rout her out!’

Joe smiled as he thought to himself how much he should like to see the little man engaged in the process of ‘routing’ Lizzie out; but wisely saying nothing on that head, he suggested that they should be off. To this the doctor made not the smallest objection, and calling one of the farm hands to carry the bait-can, the rods, and Monckton’s stout gaff-hook, they went out into the fresh, bright morning.







## CHAPTER XXIX.

### A LUCKY CLIP WITH THE GAFF-HOOK.

IMMEDIATELY opposite to the mill buildings, the rush from the foaming mass of water pouring over the weir hatches at the head of the pool became gradually less turbulent. The deep, resistless eddies, that would have whirled any but the very strongest swimmer round and round like a cork, ending at last by sucking him down under the very fall of water, had long expended nearly all their force, and now rolled downwards, with here and there a swirling, wide-circling ripple, that told of terribly deep water even still. Under a high clay bank on the mill side was a noted winter cast for grayling. A swing gate opened lower down into a meadow, some tall trees hiding the mill buildings almost as soon as one was in the mead. Two hundred yards still farther on, and a little cramped wooden stile barred the entrance to a narrow, winding path, which led through a belt of larch elders and firs skirting the stream. All down the side of this wood was good pike fishing; the water, however, was difficult to get at on account of the thickness and density of the timber.

How little poor old Joe thought, as he gave his com-

panion a hand over the stile—his heart as blithe and merry as the bright sunshine itself—that from that very standpoint he was destined to see a sight towards evening that would crush the laughter of his heart and lips in the selfsame fashion as one crushes the bloom from a flower when one puts one's heavy boot on it. Well for us all, perhaps, that we know not what is in store for us. If we did, it is likely that laughter and mirth would jar sadly and unmusically at times.

'Shade of Izaak Walton!' said the doctor, in low, eager tones, after they had gone some little distance, and pushing, as he spoke, through tall, slender trees, bending and rustling under the influence of a brisk westerly wind, impelling the fleecy-white clouds like hurrying squadrons overhead. 'Joe, my dear lad,' he continued, 'look here—here's a jolly place! I'll bet you my boots I get a jack here.'

A likely place enough. A deep, still eddy, with a little belt of decaying reeds and rushes growing out from the bank. A good deep hole, where the water shallowed gradually over a sandy, loamy bottom, until it showed a stratum of decaying leaves and sticks, thickly matted at the edge of the stream in little more than a few inches of water.

'No go, doctor, I think. Better push on ahead for the deeps—there's lots of fish there,' cried Morton.

'No go! Dash my waistcoat straps and buttons! if this hole don't hold a pike or two, there isn't one in the river. Give me my rod, boy!'

In ten minutes he was fitted up, while Joe, sitting down on an old, worm-eaten rail, bordering the path on the wood side, lit his pipe and watched his operations.

‘There!’ cried the jolly old fellow, as he bent down the top of a tough hickory rod with the running line—‘there! what do you say to that for a tool, eh? There never was a better rod than that in merry England—one of Chevalier’s.’

Then he put on a stout gimp paternoster—gut for pike fishing was not in vogue then—though why, if salmon were killed on single gut, it is difficult to determine.

‘Now, boy, give me that can!’ he cried, in a fever of excitement; and unrolling as he spoke a stout hook from a bit of paper neatly folded round it, he chuckled softly to himself as he became satisfied by experiment on the ball of his own thumb that the hook’s point was all right. ‘If I don’t have a pike in ten minutes I’m a Dutchman, and will try somewhere else!’ So saying, he drew ten yards of line off the winch, popped a bright little dace on, and flicked him neatly out to the very centre of the eddy, where the lead sank at once, tapping the gravelly bottom with a gentle thumping jar.

Holding the rod point down, the doctor worked his bait towards the side gently with his left fingers, coiling up the loose line neatly in the palm of his hand, just as one may see crack Thames trout spinners do whilst standing on the piles of a weir, and spinning the foaming waters below.

‘I’ll bet you a couple of blue pills you don’t get one, doctor!’ shouted Joe from the fence, and laughing at the oddity of the bet.

‘Done! Confound your impudence! And if you lose I’m hanged if you shan’t take ’em. Blue murder! I’ve got a run!’

It was even so. The doctor had felt the unmistakable

'snock' that 'Johnny' communicates at once to the anxious angler as he scrunches the bait in his fanged jaws, and the line was being gently 'joggled' every now and then preparatory to its sneaking off towards the rushes.

'Look at him! Hark till him! There he goes, the beauty!' cried Monckton. 'Hang it, my boy, those pills are down your throat!'

'Nay, lad, thou hast na got him yet,' cried Joe, dropping at once into the broad vernacular, as he invariably did when anything occurred to excite him.

To a keen fisherman like Joe, the fact of a good pike running was quite enough to rouse all his dormant energy—as, indeed, it ought to be in everybody's case.

'How long dost give 'em wi' that tackling, doctor?'

'It all depends. There, he's off again! He's but a little one, I'm afraid.'

'Perhaps t'others muzzling him. There's likely enow to be Darby and Joan in a hole like that.'

'Aye,' replied Monckton. 'Steady! Now he's stopped. Look at the line, Joe—he's turning his bait now. Good, I'll give him a toothache in a minute.'

Two seconds more—half a minute—and then the little doctor, getting his line taut, and glancing hastily down at buttons and boots to see that the silk was clear, lifted the point of his rod, and struck. The line twanged musically in the clear, sharp air, and pulling heavily at the supple top joint, the fish shot out towards the centre of the eddy.

'He's a ten-pounder!' screamed the doctor; and as the fish bored heavily on the little man's wrist, pulling the rod top clean into the water, his eyes blazed with the light of

enthusiastic triumph, his mouth set hard and firm, and his red face lost three shades at least of its ruddy hue.

‘Go it, you darling—you beauty of the deep! I’m with you. Ah! More power to yer fins and strength to yer tail! Pull away, my beauty—my jewel—pull away! I’ve got sixty yards for a run, and ye may have fifty of it!’

Thus the doctor, to Joe’s intense delight. The honest, true-hearted fellow was ten times better pleased to afford others pleasure than to enjoy the fun himself at all times, and when he at last caught a gleam of a big, golden-brown side in the clear water, he gave a shrill, clear hunting scream that half made the doctor drop the rod.

‘Dal, man, but thoo’s gotten a monster! He’s a twenty-pound fish!’

‘Shut up!’ roared Monckton in response. ‘He’s a big fish, I know, and if I get nervous I shall make a mess of it.’

He didn’t get nervous, however. Not an atom of such weakness pervaded the doctor’s play, and after many an angry tug at the top joint, many a roll on the top, many a sounding splash of the mighty tail, the big pike at last rolled side up, and his nose shot aimlessly into the morning light and sunshine, responsive to a steady strain from the little medico’s nervous wrist. He never got down any more. He lashed the surface of his late home with a tremulous beat of his broad fins—he smacked the clear wave with his powerful tail until the spray flew high, and fell tinkling in tiny silver spots on the river’s bosom—bubbles that floated for a moment, and, like human passions, floated briefly. Joe stepped to the doctor’s side, gaff in hand. Nearer came the big broad nose—nearer and nearer.

‘Steady!’ cried the doctor, beginning to tremble now that all was over. ‘Don’t you miss him, Joe! That’s it—under his jaw! Mind the line. Hurrah!—hip, hip, hurrah!—he’s mine!’

Joe’s strong arm had him out in a twinkling. Then they carried him up the gentle slope, and he slapped and tumbled about on the narrow path, snapping his long, armed jaws, until all the glory of his panoply of green, gold, and pearly-grey spots was half hidden in a covering of dead leaves, red and yellow, and bits of withered stick, which stuck fast to his slimy jacket. He was a grand fish of fully eighteen pounds, and in another quarter of an hour, after a pipe and a pull at the pocket pistol, the doctor was fast in another, the male, and the brace of beauties presently lay side by side.

All down the home mead was grand pike-fishing ground, and runs came fast and furious. Now the doctor had one on, next Joe, until at last, as the red sun was beginning to dip behind the tall trees, they came to the conclusion that they had really done enough.

‘Fifteen jack in one day is quite enough for any man in reason,’ said Monckton, ‘and, setting all other things on one side, I’m as hungry and tired as a foxhound after a long run. By George, it’s been glorious sport all through, and no mistake about it.’

‘Then you’ll give it up?’ asked Joe, just in the act of dipping his hand in the can for another dace.

‘Oh! I think so. What say you?’

‘As you please. Oh, it’s later than I thought it was,’ he added, looking at his watch; ‘we shall just have nice time for a wash and a glass of sherry before dinner.’

The boy had been for a big basket, and into this the fish were packed. The spare dace were turned into the river again, and then they started for the mill. Joe was in radiant spirits, and chatted gaily with his companion, his chief talk being about the doctor's anticipated introduction to his new patient.

Through the little wood they went, Joe slightly ahead, until they got to the hole where Monckton had hooked his big fish of the morning. At this hole the doctor hung fire, stopping, as nearly any good fisherman would have done, to have another peep at the scene of so gallant a fight. Thus Joe gained ground, and at the stile was sixty or seventy yards ahead. Still, he was in sight, and, to Monckton's unbounded astonishment, he saw him throw up his hands, clasping his forehead as one in mortal agony.

'My God!—my God!' ejaculated the unhappy man, in a voice broken and husky with emotion. 'Oh! take my sight away, Great Father,' he wailed, 'and spare me this misery.'

'Morton!—Joe!—Great heavens, what is this?' panted Monckton, as he hastened up. 'Speak to me, old fellow. Are you ill?'

'Would to God I were dead. Look! Monckton, look!'

'Well,' said the little man, as, following Joe's outstretched finger, he saw a woman under the shadow of the trees on the farther side of the meadow. A woman with her head enveloped in a scarlet shawl, her yielding figure clasped lovingly in the arms of a man!—a woman whose bare arms shone white in the gathering gloaming, as they were twined round the neck of him who stood with her.

'Well, my dear old friend, what of this? Come, come,

this is nothing to you ; a village flirtation, nothing more.'

Swift as the stroke of a thunderbolt, the fall of a falcon on its quarry, a terrible change had come over honest Joe's sun-burnt, manly features. With a cry like that of a famished tiger's he screamed rather than shouted—

'Nay, that's my wife ! And that man is Hubert Welford ! Curses on him ! Curses on him for an arrant cur ! Damn him—the hound ! I'll have his heart's blood.'

They heard him raging like a hungry beast. With all the devil in him uproused, and panting for revenge, they saw him bound over the stile like a buck flying for his life before hounds close on his heels. With a shrill scream, sounding in the still evening almost like a noosed hare's, Lizzie pushed the gate open, and flew for the shelter of home, whilst Hubert, coolly raising his hat, sauntered on towards the weir. A good two hundred yards separated the two men, and Joe commenced running towards his deadly enemy with tremendous bounds as soon as he was over the stile. Seemingly blinded with rage and fury, he stumbled at every step, uttering hoarse cries as he ran. A little ditch crossed the meadow, taking his course down to the river at right angles. A stout plank offered the usual means of crossing but Morton, neither seeing nor remembering the ditch, blundered into it, and fell prone in the shallow water and amongst the slimy duckweed. He was up in an instant. An ugly sight, for he had cut his forehead slightly on a stone, the blood was trickling down and dabbling his pale face, and he was covered with slime and weed. The slight check had led up the doctor and the boy. Monckton, the moment he



came near him, caught Joe by the arm, imploring him to stop and speak to him for a moment.

‘Stop, man ! I’ll never stop till my fingers are on his throttle. Blast him !—I half feared this. Let me go, Monckton !’ he shouted, and he shook the little doctor fiercely and impetuously off, as though he had been the tiniest insect.

Monckton, however, would not let him go. He was as brave and true as man could be, and stood right in his path, barring the way, and looking the infuriated man full in the eyes.

‘Morton,’ he begged imploringly, ‘be a man ! Think, my friend, before you act rashly—for God’s sake think. There may be—nay, there *must* be—nothing but imprudence. Don’t *you* do anything—for your wife’s sake, for your own soul’s sake—that you may bitterly reproach yourself for hereafter.’

Poor Morton ! He listened for a second or two with his eyes fixed hungrily upon the retreating figure of the man sauntering carelessly on in front.

At the mention of his wife’s name the blazing orbs softened momentarily, and the doctor took instant advantage of the change, begging him, for his boy’s sake, to moderate his passion, and endeavour to look at things as they stood, calmly and philosophically.

‘Hard advice to follow, doctor,’ hissed Joe, between his clenched teeth, as he started again to follow the retreating figure of the captain, ‘but I’ll try—I’ll try—for my baby boy’s sake. Oh, God ! but this is a bitter hour !’ he groaned, with such a terrible inflexion of grief and heart-broken

misery in the tones of his late happy voice, that Monckton's heart bled for him.

Then Joe's eyes blazed again, as the thought of his loved wife's wreathing arms maddened him, and lifting his powerful, sonorous voice he roared at its highest pitch :

'Stop! Do you hear there, Hubert Welford? Stop, thief! or by heaven I'll loose my dog on you!'

Hubert wheeled round instantly, and wiped his face with his cambric handkerchief. Several of the farm labourers, attracted by the unusual noise, stood in the roadway outside the gate. There was not a trace of Joe's guilty wife to be seen. The boy, who had dropped his load of fishing tackle and spoil, followed close at Monckton's heels, and in half a minute more the husband and the lover stood face to face.

'Now, my worthy grinder of corn for the million,' commenced Hubert, carelessly, while a smile of the most intensely supercilious contempt flitted across his handsome face, 'you did me the honour to roar "Stop!" just now—like a bull of Bashan afflicted with catarrh. What do you please to want? If it's orders, I don't want any flour just now, thanks. Can you oblige me with a light? Hum! I see the delightful creature's sulky.'

Joe's breath came and went in great gasping sighs. The veins on his forehead swelled like cords, while he held his sinewy, powerful hands tightly clasped behind him. He bit and gnawed at his nether lip till the blood ran. He never uttered a syllable, however, but stood looking at Hubert's face, with his eyes devouring every one of the scornful mocking expressions that flitted over the face of this deadly cruel enemy.

‘Why don’t you tell your friend that it is dreadfully rude to breathe so hard?’ said Hubert at length, and addressing Monckton, with a little scornful, light-hearted laugh. ‘You don’t look a bit like a miller to-day, *très cher*. If you were a market gardener, now—or, better still, an Italian oilman—I should say you more nearly resembled a pickled onion than anything else that I can call to mind. Frightful mess you’re in, to be sure.’

‘For shame, Hubert Welford!’ cried Monckton, his voice ringing like a clear-toned bell with honest indignation. ‘For shame, sir, I say, to taunt a man who is a victim to your rascally treachery!’

‘Treachery! Well, I like that,’ and he laughed gaily, with terrible insolence. ‘I think it was you and this worthy specimen of the ’orny-anded tribe, now, who were treacherous, in coming along the fields so softly. Ah! fishermen; yes, they’re always crafty. In another moment, miller, I should have stolen a delicious kiss.’

‘Thoo lies, thou damnable hound!’ screamed Joe, all the cruelly pent-up passion of his great heart bursting like an overwhelming torrent, and beating down the frail barriers of self-restraint that he had tried hard to restrain. ‘Coward! dastard! thoo lies!’ and at the words Joe sprang towards him with outstretched hands, as though he would have grappled with him.

Hubert, however, jumped nimbly backwards a step or two nearer to the edge of the terrible foaming weir fall.

‘Lie, do I, my jovial miller? Elephantine beast! Take that, then, brute, for telling me so!’ and at the words his thin supple cane hissed through the air, his vengeful arm

came down, and the stroke fell across Joe's pallid, agonised face, leaving a red livid weal right athwart his sun-tanned cheek.

With a roar like a hungry lion's, and with up-raised fist, **he** bounded upon his foe. Again Hubert eluded him, his laugh ringing out clear as a bell as he jumped nimbly aside, like a matador eluding a goaded bull. A second time the cane fell, full across Joe's mouth, while the other laughed a merry, happy peal that sounded as horrible on the still calm of the peaceful scene as though the wail of a little child had been heard from the blackest depths of the Inferno.

Monckton shouted to Joe to desist for his child's sake. Useless ! He might as well have asked the waves of the sea to cease plashing on the sands. He prayed, implored—all useless and unavailing. Then he cried for help loudly, for there was a murderous seal set upon Joe's face, and the group of labourers came running towards them. No one saw how it happened. It was all done in a moment, for at the instant that Morton had again raised his fist to strike, Hubert in his turn attempted to get out of harm's way, and his foot slipping on the edge of the slimy, spray-washed piles, he fell headlong with a terrible scream right into the foaming boiling eddy.

A horrible sight ! He could not swim a stroke, and went deep down instantaneously, as though his feet had been weighted with lead. His hat floated, and Monckton, half mad with grief and misery, strained his eyes in the gathering shades to catch sight of the body when it rose again.

'My God ! my God ! this is murder !' he cried, absorbed in horror. 'He'll drown, Morton ! drown, man ; do you hear ?'

‘Let him!’ answered Joe hoarsely; ‘a fitting death for a dog.’

Two white hands beating the water idly, shot from the surface in the very middle of the terrible impetuous back-eddy; then Hubert’s head appeared, with his eyes glaring at them with an awful intensity, the seal of death set on his white face, and suddenly a hoarse, choking, agonizingly shrill scream for help from the drowning man pealed through the evening stillness, and re-echoed over the tumbling waters.

‘A hundred pounds to anyone who’ll save him. A rope! Oh, God! Get a rope!’ screamed Monckton, in an agony of distress, fear, and horror. ‘He cannot swim a stroke. Get a rope some of you, for God’s sake!’

‘Here! stand back everybody!’ cried brave-hearted Joe, his grandly magnificent frame in one second aglow with God-like pity, while his face worked with suppressed passion struggling hotly with his innate nobility of soul—‘stand back and let me have a spring. He’s a dog of a man, but I canna stand by and see him drown.’

Oh, brave heart! Oh, grandly beautiful yet simple soul! Oh, chivalric high-principled hero! Bravery, pity, all-absorbing gentle pity, for the hopeless death-struggles of his deadliest enemy blotted out from Joe’s mind, for the time at least, all trace of the bitter wrong wrought at the hands of the drowning man. The blood rushed to his heart in a generous full tide of true tender emotion. He forgot the cruel smart of the cowardly dastardly lash across his face, and he kicked his boots off. In an instant he flung his coat and waistcoat down, and then, swift in his pity as in his

desire for revenge, he ran back three steps, took a sharp, quick stride or two, and with a mighty bound launched his powerful body into space. Falling, it sent up a volume of shiny spray and glittering water, as his broad bosom struck that of the waters of the dam.

Out shot his left arm like the piston of a steam-engine. Swimming on his side, he buried his head and face in the frothy waves, as though contact from the cold water would wash the stain of dishonour from his face and bosom. His powerful strokes impelled him through the deep, ravening, sucking eddies, as though his body had been driven by machinery. He neared the drowning man; every stroke took him nearer to the cruel foe, who had not many moments before held his very heart's idol in his arms, and lashed his cheek with the stinging cane. Did he hesitate? Did one thought obtrude upon Joe's heart and mind that it were better to let this man die? If it did, it never abated one jot the vigour of his stroke, or the rate at which he impelled himself through the water. With a terrible cry Hubert had again been sucked down, and, instantly rearing himself out from the waves, Joe caught sight of his sinking foe, and dived to his rescue. He caught him by the back of the neck, and for a second a struggle went on under the waves, the drowning man trying to grapple with his saviour, and Joe doing all he knew to retain his hold. It was soon over, and, rising to the surface, Joe slowly and laboriously forged his way back again, fighting a terrible battle, hampered as he was, with the strong rush of the water.

His face was purple now with the violence of the struggle. Heedless of the mud, the doctor, side by side with the

labourers, knelt on the bank, anxious to grip Joe's arm as soon as he bore his burthen safely to the side. Twice the water sucked him down, yet he held Hubert's head up. Twice the cruel eddy dragged and tore at his failing limbs, and Joe sank to the chin, as though the spirits of the pool were hanging on to his feet. Monckton's very soul trembled on his lips. He was afraid to shout, for fear that the cry might unnerve the struggling man—struggling, desperately struggling, to reach the side. Yet a few more strokes and he would be in quieter water.

How eagerly Monckton and the men watched each upward shoot of the single arm, grandly magnificent in its strength, which Joe had at his service—the other, recollect, grappled Hubert's collar—when just as he was within a few feet of the side, and Joe's bloodshot eyes smiled a weary smile of triumph to his friend, the powerful limbs again faltered, and he sank deeper down, the waters lapping up to his nose and chin. Monckton had his gaff-hook in his hand—he had told the lad to fetch it—and, holding out one arm to the labourers with mute gesture, he leaned over the water as soon as the men gripped him, and popped the hook neatly under Joe's braces. Two seconds more and half a score willing hands caught hold of Hubert, and thus released Joe from the heavy dead weight of the senseless man. In less time than it takes one to write these lines, Morton, aided by the men, had got a foothold on the slippery piles, and scrambled on to dry land once more.

The men half waited for orders what to do. They knew of course that Hubert ought to be taken at once to the house. They felt there were reasons why he should not.

They had laid Hubert's apparently lifeless body down, and instinctively Monckton turned to Joe as though waiting for some sign.

'Take him to the house, Monckton, and do all you can for him. I cannot do more now,' said Joe, while his lips quivered, and his bloodshot eyes filled with great tears.

Monckton signed to the men, and they lifted their lifeless burden. The doctor turned to Joe, and, with unwonted tears streaming down his own ruddy cheeks, he said, in a broken voice: 'May God Almighty bless you! You are the most gallant man in all broad England.' Then, without another word, he turned, and followed the men to the house.







## CHAPTER XXX.

### JOE ASKS FOR AN EXPLANATION.

‘KEEP his head up, my lads,’ called Monckton, in a voice compounded of a curious mixture of command and half-pitying sorrow. Carried he was, in such-like fashion as London policemen transport refractory drunkards to the nearest lock-up, and Hubert was anything but a pleasant sight. His head hung down, dripping with the water of the deep pool. His eyes were half closed, showing a shadowy, dim blue line where the pupils were just seen under the thin, lead-coloured lids. The long lashes swept his drowned, pale cheek, while the white teeth, shining under the drooping moustache, wet and dank, with all the stiffening washed out of it long ago, were tightly closed in the agony of a near glimpse of death. Not a sigh moved his throat, not a single gasp for returning life stirred the folds of the wet linen that clung to his bosom.

‘Push on quick, men! I’m afraid he’s nearer his end than I thought. Yes, right in there, and lay him on the kitchen table. Now send at once for hot water-bottles or hot bricks. Get me some feathers—and here, you Tom Needham, help me to slip these clothes off.’

In a moment afterwards Hubert lay bare to the waist, while Monckton propped up his head with a hard sofa pillow. A woman came in directly afterwards with blankets, to whom the doctor nodded quietly in approval as she spread them out before the blazing fire.

Grasping Hubert's arms above the elbows, Monckton drew them steadily upwards, and then pressed them down gently again to his side. This method he kept up with methodical exactness, the labourers all the while chafing his limbs to restore warmth, until a gentle sigh struggled for existence upon the drowned man's lips. Then one of the men, by Monckton's orders, dashed a cupful of cold water violently upon Hubert's face and bosom. This was directly afterwards followed by another splash of hot fluid, and a gasping, choked sob rattled upwards from the labouring bosom.

'He'll do now, my lads. Tell that woman—here, Mrs. What's-your-Name, where are you? Ha! gone, of course. Tell her, then, John, to get me some brandy.'

Monckton soon had his patient's remaining wet clothes off, and, wrapping him well up in numberless folds of thick, fleecy blankets, had him propped up in the ample armchair in front of a rousing fire. A stiff glass of hot brandy and water worked wonders directly it had been swallowed by the captain, who began at once to question Monckton as to the method of his rescue.

'Doctor,' said he, rather feebly as yet, and after the question had been fenced and parried a round dozen of times, 'I insist upon knowing who pulled me out of that horrible pool. Ugh! I shudder even now as I think how those

infernal waters hissed and foamed round me. Curse that hound of a Morton ! He pushed me in, doctor, I'll swear. Didn't you see him do it ? Come, now, don't hesitate. You saw him push me in, I know.'

'I saw nothing of the sort, Captain Welford,' replied Monckton, in measured set phrase. 'That I'll swear to before forty juries, if necessary. You fell in by pure accident. And before you call that man a hound, please to recollect that it was he who, at the risk of his own life in those fearful eddies, saved you.'

Nothing could exceed the sense of bitterly keen sarcasm conveyed in Monckton's rapidly uttered last sentences. Their biting sting reached even the men standing round the dripping table, some of whom were turning down their shirt-sleeves, and putting on their corduroy jackets, preparatory to leaving the doctor and his patient by themselves. One or two of the more intelligent among them, judging that so much at least would be safe, ventured upon a faint 'Hear, hear !' This reaching the doctor's ears, he turned round at once to dismiss them, distributing some silver for beer amongst the men—a class of folks who, as a rule, take kindly to beer at all hours, and in all weathers.

'Ah, so the big brute pulled me out, did he ? Saw the gallows in perspective, possibly. Where are my clothes ? Wet through, I suppose ; and my hat ? "Come, now," as Rogue Riderhood would have said, "worn't there no honest man to pick up my hat ?" Oh, a lot of scamps, every one of you. Give me a drop more brandy, Monckton ; I'm faint. Curse that splay-footed brute ! I'll trump his queen for him yet, or I'm a big boy.'

With every evidence of disgust in his tone and manner, the honest old doctor gave Hubert some more brandy, and then, after arrangements had been made for sending to the George for a change of clothes—even the captain seeing that it would be utterly out of all form for him to stay where he was—the doctor told him to remain quiet for a few moments while he went to speak to Morton.

‘Don’t bring him here, that’s all,’ cried Hubert after the retreating doctor. ‘I’ll brain him with this bit of iron, as sure as eggs are eggs, if you do,’ and he laid his hand on the heavy kitchen poker.

Monckton paid no heed to the reckless words, and directly afterwards the solemn measured tick-tick of the pendulum in the great oaken clock-case was the only sound heard in the big, still room.

Five minutes passed, and the captain fidgeted about in his chair—hot and cold by turns. He could not rest, and was half inclined to pull the bell-rope hanging at his elbow, if it were only to get some one to come in and talk to him. He was a good deal shaken by the cold and wet, and weak as he was he was nearly giving vent to a nervous, womanly cry, when two warm arms were flung suddenly round his neck, and Lizzie’s sweet face, ablaze with such love as a woman gives once only in her lifetime, nestled eagerly and closely to his own.

‘Oh, Hubert, my darling! Thank God, you are alive!’ she whispered.

‘Lizzie, for God’s sake, go!’ cried Hubert, with every evidence of real terror. ‘If he comes here and finds you there will be murder done. Go, I tell you; go! Where did you come from?’

‘I have been here all the time, darling, watching you ! There, in that great cupboard. I knew they would bring you here. And, see !—my king ! my very own !’ she added, in a whisper so full of passionate, trembling love that her dulcet voice died away into a hoarse, grating murmur ; ‘had you died—had it been all useless—ah, God ! had my love been valueless !—I had died too !’ and she showed him a tiny revolver, with every chamber loaded, which she drew from the folds of soft lace that covered the heavings of her fair bosom.

In spite of all the danger, the assurance of this woman’s love was so great that he drew her to him and kissed her passionately, while his eyes filled with an unholy light. For her part, she returned his embrace with tenfold ardour. Then he bade her go at once—imperiously bade her go, for her own sake as well as his own.

‘One moment, Hubert,’ she whispered. ‘Does all stand good now ? Are you equally determined ?’

‘Am I ?’ he cried, in astonishment, and while a look of triumph illumined his face. ‘Yes, by heaven !—ten thousand times yes ! And you, do you shrink ?’

‘I love you, Hubert,’ she said simply, with an inscrutable expression.

‘Then go, and remember to-morrow night, by the 8.30. Don’t bring a thing of that hound’s with you. Hark ! there’s Monckton’s voice—go, I tell you.’

She kissed his forehead hastily, and then, fleet as a hind, bounded across the room and went out at the door behind the great chintz-covered screen.

It was full time that she did, for in another moment

Morton, followed by the doctor, entered the room. He had changed his wet things, and was determined to have an explanation. Joe was very pale, and trembled from head to heel as he crossed the room with hasty strides, and took up his position opposite to the fireplace. Monckton followed him rapidly, and, passing him, planted himself full in front of Hubert. As for the latter gentleman, Joe's advent was so utterly unexpected that for a few moments he stared with half-alarmed expression, and grasped the poker as though he feared a sudden attack.

'Thoo may put that poker down, Captain Hubert Welford,' said Joe hoarsely, and with measured expression. 'Thoo'rt but weakly yet, man, and though thoo's done mey and mine harm, I shanna hit thee.'

'I'd strongly advise you not to try it, miller ; for, weak as I may be, I'll brain you as I would a mad dog, for trying to drown me a while ago.'

'There was them there as know whether you lie or not, Captain Hubert Welford,' answered Joe simply. 'As for mysen, I've something else to think of.'

'Why don't you say "myself," miller,' cried Hubert, with a cruel, sneering laugh, 'not "mysen"—it's so dreadfully ungrammatical.'

Joe gnawed his lip again, until he half bit the lower one through ; but, still, even under the taunting torture he made no sign. Monckton, however, turned full upon Hubert, with every line of his face twisted, and writhing with angry emotion.

'Look here, Hubert Welford !' he cried, in an access of honest indignation. 'For your mother's sake I have been

anxious to stand your friend in this matter, and endeavour to put matters straight. That they look very crooked at present I'll not attempt to deny ; but, on my honour, if you insult that man by so much as a single word again, I will leave you to fight it out with him by yourself.'

'My very good medical attendant, you are at perfect liberty to do as you please. I ask no boon from heaven or from you ; nothing, save that you will have the goodness to leave this bit of iron handy. With that in my fist I don't care a hang for twenty millers. As for yourself, dear old boy—bah ! I daresay any little matter in which I am indebted to you will be fully set out in your bill, my good sir.'

'Captain Hubert Welford,' said the doctor sternly and distinctly, the tones of his cheery voice vibrating and ringing like a bell, the while his face glowed with honest anger, 'I have the honour to tell you that you are a consummate rascal !' and the doctor bowed low to the ground.

'Ah !' cried Hubert, with a careless laugh, 'you take advantage of my being *in puris naturalibus*, eh ? otherwise, on my honour, and old as you are, I should kick you, dear sir, out of this highly respectable house,' bowing gracefully from his chair as he spoke.

'By heaven, sir, old as I am you shall one day have the opportunity !' roared the stout-hearted old fellow.

'Delighted, 'pon honour ! and I'll take care my boots are thick-soled when the time arrives,' laughed Hubert gaily.

'Now, doctor,' said Morton sternly and quietly, 'I think this has gone quite far enow.' Turning to Hubert, he said equally quietly, 'Thoo may put that poker down, my lad. Thou'st safe enow from mey—at *present*,' he added, with

grave meaning. 'Now, I ask thee what wert doing with my wife's arms round your neck awhile ago?'

'An unfair question, miller. You can hardly expect me to tell you, for the lady's sake.'

'Never mind the lady, my lad ; attend to thysen. Thou'lt have enow to do before long, I promise thee. Now, Captain Welford, I repeat my question.'

'Is it necessary, miller ? Could you not see for yourself?'

'I saw quite enow, I'll admit.'

'Then be content, friend miller. Go thy way in peace, like an honest dealer in farinaceous supplies, as you doubtless are, and if you have such a thing as a cigar in the place, send it to me by thy prettiest handmaid.'

'All that chatter will not content me, Captain Welford,' answered Joe sternly, and fixing his eyes upon Hubert as he spoke. 'I must and will have an answer. What I want to know is—what did it all mean, and what is it to lead to? How dare you come here after my wife?'

'Oh, bother heroics,' laughed Welford. 'What's the price of wheat? If you stand there like a transpontine theatrical husband, aggrieved because somebody has been trespassing upon his preserves, for a whole week, you'll get no answer from me. So send me that cigar, dear boy, and go and attend to your mill.'

'Very well, Hubert Welford ; then thoo shalt fight me till one or the other dies. Mind you I will ask you the same question before the colonel and officers of your regiment, and if you refuse to fight me abroad or here—I care not which—I'll thrash thoo within an inch of thy life, and brand thee as a coward and poltroon before all the world !'



In reply, Hubert laughed a merry peal of laughter, which rang through the room like a clarion.

‘Ha ! ha ! ha ! magnificent, miller ! you ought, by gad, with your talent, to take the town by storm. Oh, what an Othello is smothered here in flour. Say it over again, dear boy ; say it over again. How did you do that wave of the hand—so ? No ! a little more to the left, I think. Ah ! that’s the exact curve to a tick. Immense ! I’ll tell Lady Diana the whole story when I get back.’

‘Doctor,’ moaned Joe in deadly agony, and wrestling with his roused passions, ‘I canna keep my hands off him, the taunting demon—and in my own house, too. Fight me, you shall, you cursed villain !’ he roared. ‘Yes, till one or both dies. Here ! you cruel-tongued scoundrel, tak’ good hold on yon poker now, and I’ll have but a stick. Si’thee !’ cried Joe, his maddened temper roused to boiling pitch. ‘Si’ thee ! tak’ thy seat one side o’ the fire, and I t’other ; thoo may have t’poker, and I this stick, and we’ll see which can beat hardest. Come !’

‘And I naked, most valiant grinder of flour,’ said Hubert, somewhat sobered by the tempest he had raised. ‘No, thank you ; not just yet. But you shall have your bellyful of fight, I promise you, with any weapon you like. If you touch me now it is you who are the coward, not I.’

‘Then you’ll fight me?’ cried Joe anxiously, while his bloodshot eyes seemed to emit sparks of blue light, so intense was the fire of feverish hate burning them.

‘Fight you ! yes, and promise to shoot you like a dog,’ answered Hubert, regaining his composure rapidly.

‘That is all I want ; Monckton, come away,’ said Joe slowly.

As he spoke he turned upon his heel, and without another word left the room. The doctor followed him almost directly afterwards, yet before leaving the room he turned to Hubert, saying quietly, and very sorrowfully :

‘Hubert Welford, I’ve known you since you were a baby ; I helped to bring you into the world. But, as the Almighty hears me, if I were your own father, and desiring not your death, I would yet have asked Him to have blighted my ears and taken away my sight sooner than have looked on your face as I have looked on it this day.’

‘Ah ! a bad judge to start with,’ said Hubert carelessly. ‘And another thing ; even if you had been my father—I’m rather glad you’re not, on account of that beastly pimply nose of yours ; but if you had been, I’m open to bet you six to four that if you had asked for the blessed boons you mention, you wouldn’t have got ’em. Try it now, and I’ll bet you a hundred to five the double event.’

Without a single gesture or a word in reply, the doctor turned and left the room. Hubert chuckled softly to himself, saying quietly, ‘I think I had my ancient friend there slightly ;’ and then he used the poker, which he had never relinquished, in stirring up the fire.

Shortly afterwards a man came into the room with a port-manteau from the George. It was a change of clothes for the gallant gentleman, and a quarter of an hour afterwards he was on his way to the little town, meditating the whole way upon the nature of the revenge he meant to play upon the man who had but lately saved his life.



## CHAPTER XXXI.

### THE NIGHT EXPRESS.

VERY wisely, no doubt, Morton did not attempt to force an explanation from his wife the same night ; neither, of course, did the doctor see her. From a feeling of delicacy Monckton would have gone straight home directly after Hubert had left the house. This, however, his host would not permit, insisting upon the doctor staying to eat his dinner with him, as had been originally proposed. It was a weary meal, tasteless and of no savour to either man, although the cooking was unexceptionable. Gradually conversation turned, as it was certain to do, upon the all-absorbing later incidents of the day. Morton started it by putting a point-blank question to his guest.

‘If you were in my place, doctor,’ said he, wistfully and sadly, ‘if you were in my place, tell me, what would you do?’

‘I should of course insist upon a full explanation from my wife,’ answered Monckton impulsively.

‘And suppose she refused to give it—absolutely and entirely—what then?’ asked Joe.

‘First tell me,’ said Monckton confidentially, ‘have you ever seen anything of this kind before?’

‘Never,’ answered Joe, straight as an arrow. ‘Although I have always fancied sometimes she cared a little more at heart, perhaps, for the captain than she ever admitted to me.’

‘Ah, likely enough, likely enough. Well, I think she is bound to give you an explanation. If she were my wife she should, or I would know the reason why.’

Morton smiled wearily as he thought how little the doctor knew the self-willed, imperiously unyielding character of the guilty woman. From the very first Joe had never attempted to exercise the least control over his wife or her actions; and now, none knew better than he how utterly useless it would be to attempt to force any confession or explanation from her, unless she chose voluntarily to seek a renewal of her husband’s confidence. That she was hardly likely to do, and Joe felt that, for the time at least, he was fairly checkmated.

The conversation therefore ended at precisely the same point as it began. All that the doctor could say was that if he were in Joe’s place he should insist upon a full explanation. Morton knew that he might just as well insist upon the moon coming down and dancing a hornpipe.

He despatched his wife’s maid with a kindly message asking if he should send her some dinner upstairs. A reply came to the effect that she had had some tea, and that was all she required. Thus the dinner dragged painfully. No ‘fishy’ chat or argument upon sporting topics generally—that wondrous source of interest to men devoted to the field—enlivened the meal, and therefore the doctor, after one cigar, there and then invented a case of surpassing perplexity which it was necessary for him to attend to that night before

sleeping. Brown Molly forthwith made her appearance, the gig-lamps burning brightly ; the doctor buttoned himself up comfortably behind the stout leather apron and bade his host a final good-night, leaving poor old Joe with the grinning ghosts of his dead happiness, the naked skeleton of his shattered love, to sit at his elbow through the long evening.

He sent up another message to his wife, saying that the doctor had gone, and asking her to come down to him. He was a fool, of course, was this great, big-hearted giant, and loved his wife's winsome face and sweet blue eyes so much like a fool, that had she cared so to play her cards, she might have had him at her feet in ten minutes, with, perhaps, nothing left but a dull, half-painless aching somewhere in the region of his left side, to remind him of the events of the evening. It seems a pity that the curse of a woman's beauty in many cases is the source of the very bitterest sorrow that can overtake him who loves blindly, and so loving with a true honest impulse looks simply on the fair surface.

In reply to her husband's message, Lizzie sent word that she was ill ; that she could not meet him that evening, and fully intended to take up her quarters for the night in the spare room. She hoped, moreover, that her husband would not trouble himself further about her, and that any explanation he desired must stand over for the morrow. That was the substance of the answer conveyed to him by his wife's handmaid. It was galling to receive it doubtless, and many men would have gone straight upstairs and sent the door of the lady's room open with a rattle, determined not to lay their heads upon a pillow that night without getting to the

bottom of the whole suspicious business. Joe, however, was of a different stamp ; and not only that, but please to remember that he was a fool. He loved his wife so dearly, the witchery of her blue eyes had made such havoc with that woolly and impressionable organ that did duty for his heart, that sooner than have done the least act to lower her in the estimation of his household, he would have chopped his right hand off. He, therefore, like a fool, and perhaps like a gentleman, accepted the situation, and calmly lit his pipe, sitting alone in the big room before a blazing fire, in the same chair that had so lately held his rival, with no sound in the still quiet of the house, seeming almost unnaturally quiet that particular night, save the measured beat of the great clock at the farther end of the room, and the far-off never-ceasing splash and roar of the weir fall.

The silence became at last insupportable. Not only that, but the room became peopled with ghosts, hovering shadowy forms, that always seemed to take his wife's shape. The rustle of her dress sounded in every corner, although the resemblance was simply produced, perhaps, by the scamper of a mouse across the still room, or the creaking of an antiquated piece of furniture. Twice Joe started, half-alarmed, from his seat, for he fancied that he could almost clasp his wife's graceful form, so close did it appear to be to him ; and once he could have sworn that the fitful light from the fire fell full upon the dead-gold glitter of her hair, as she sat in the low crimson-cushioned rocking-chair. Of course, it was all nonsense, and Joe confessed to himself that he must be nervous and out of sorts. To dissipate it all, he rang the bell for lights, and brewed a mighty jorum of

toddy. Then the little lad was brought in, his great brown eyes as usual agape with gratified wonder, to bid his father a last good-night. The child stretched forth his tiny hands in loving welcome towards Joe, a simple act which caused him, on account of his being such an infernal fool, to have a great choking lump rise in his throttle, and to feel a pang at his heart, as though that putty-like organ had been suddenly grasped by the hand of a giant. What an ass! Of course he was—not a shadow of a doubt of it; and what does he do next but insist upon taking the boy from his nurse, intending that for that night the child should sleep by his own side!

Silence again, the girl being gone; and as Joe's thoughts swiftly hurry onwards shadowy forms again start up on every hand. Then great tears welled up into his kindly loving eyes, as with his heart throbbing painfully, bruised and battered as it was, he laid his bronzed cheek against the soft pinky face of his only child, whose little fingers strayed idly wandering over his own, and amongst the curling masses of his hair. He thought of the day when the baby's first feeble wail had smote upon his ear, and how when he knelt at the mother's bedside—he had loved her with a deeper and holier devotion than he had ever rendered to his God, for giving him so precious a token of her love. He marshalled in order all the thousand graces she possessed, all the indefinite charms of her peerless beauty, which had made him prouder of his wife than an autocrat could have been of the humility and homage of a nation. Then he thought bitterly of her soft rounded arms being wreathed round the neck of his cruel-tongued rival until the remembrance well-

nigh utterly crushed him. He tortured his jealous soul with thousands of horrible fancies, writhing in his misery, and groaning in the intensity of his bitter anguish. A great drop coursed down his nose, and fell with a plash upon the child's upturned cheek. The boy laughed and cooed merrily, looking up in his father's suffering face with eyes that glittered like stars.

Wrestling manfully with his sorrow, he prayed silently for aid from on high. When is an earnest prayer ever listened to with a deaf ear? Comforted and refreshed, Joe watched the lad's bright eyes grow dimmer, and yet more dim, as sleep took possession of the child's senses, and wrapping him in the thick, warm blanket, he folded him with a feeling of thankfulness to his broad bosom. The fire died out in tiny flickerings: the ashes fell softly, like snow-flakes; the solemn noise of the falling water rolled on through the deep stillness of the night, and father and son slept. So passed the night, and when the grey dawn crept slowly through the eastern sky the first sight that met Joe's aching eyes was the boy's still smiling in his own.

It was market morning, and Morton had a long drive before him. His breakfast was all ready when, cramped and unrefreshed by his wearisome vigil in the hard, unrestful chair, he came back after laving his face and neck in cool, refreshing water. Had he consulted his own wishes he would have let his appointment with Messrs. Crump and Snell upon the question of a larger purchase of grain go to the deuce; but, inasmuch as there was a muttering as to probable war, with a chance of foreign ports being closed,



Joe knew that he had an advantageous bargain in store, and thus determined upon keeping his appointment.

How he wished he could see his wife but for one moment before he mounted his horse. An unaccountable strange longing to kiss her before he started seemed to hold him spellbound. Twenty times he made up his mind not to go, and each time he overcame what seemed to him a weakly, spiritless resolution. It might have been better, perhaps, had he left the chance of a purchase of Crump and Snell's goods to another day, but then Morton had not the eyes of a seer, and the gift was therefore denied him of being able to peer into futurity.

At the very moment when he was drawing on his stout-knitted gloves, for it was a cold, raw morning, he sent Lizzie's maid up to her bedroom to see if she were awake. He longed to see her, if but for an instant, with the intense craving of a drowning man who sees land just within the compass of a dozen or more strokes of his nerveless arms. It was weak and childish, of course, on Morton's part, and he ought, after his experience, to have been above such folly. But then, this was Joe's first love—his only love ; she was the mother of his child, and, moreover, he had one of those strange, curiously disposed natures—rarely met with, it is true—that is always longing to forgive, let the injury be as deep as it may.

The girl came down again to say that her mistress was fast asleep. Then Joe thought he would write a little note to her, so that she might have it at her breakfast hour, usually about eleven. He thought he would tell her how dearly he loved her, what misery he was enduring, entreat her to assure

him that the meeting with the captain was a matter of pure accident, and unpremeditated, and that her love was still his own.

For a moment he forgot the wreathing arms, the attitude of her he loved, as she leaned on Hubert's bosom. He ground his teeth hard when it was again forced upon his memory, and he felt that he could not preserve his own dignity and sense of manliness by making any advance towards his wife. It was clearly from her that the explanation must come, and in seeking for a conciliatory confession he felt that he could have no hand. He was only too eager to forgive, but he yet shrank from extending his forgiveness so anxiously, that his offending wife might pick and choose as she pleased.

Thus Joe, with a heavy, sad heart, trotted his mare up the road on his way to the market town. It was the first time he had ever left his wife with anything like a serious rupture between them, and the reflection weighed wearily upon Morton's usually elastic, happy nature. He pulled the mare up from her trot, and, turning in his saddle, looked up with tear-smirched eyes at the windows of his wife's room. The blinds were down, and all that he saw was the heavy frame, showing black and distinct against the white drapery. Then Joe set his face resolutely towards the town, and tried to enter into a series of calculations as to the price per quarter that he intended to give Crump and Snell for their wheat.

He was a good business man was Joe Morton, but on this occasion he was all abroad, so that he tried to occupy his mind with the beauties of the fresh, crisp morning, wonder-

ing presently, amidst a thousand other things, whether scent would lie well on the fallows.

There was the usual bustle and hurry-skurrying at the market town. Groups of farmers stood at the street-corners threshing away at their sturdy nether limbs with the ash-plant that every man amongst the agricultural population seems to carry in his fist when he comes into a country town.

Sheep were penned tight as herrings in a barrel in the whitewashed compartments set apart for them. Cattle were tied up tight by the head, and one or other discontented beast gave vent every now and then to a deplorably stifled bellow. Calves, literally a legion of them, filled the market square with calf-like utterances of pain and annoyance, in consequence of their being subjected, in common with every other living thing in the place, to a succession of proddings and diggings, pinchings and punchings, at the hands of every moon-faced idiot, buyer or otherwise, who sauntered down amongst the rows of live stock. It is simply disgraceful to watch at any country live-stock market the amount of unnecessary pain and torture which is inflicted upon the unhappy animals brought up for sale. Sheep are clobbered over the nose with the ash-plants every two minutes, while to push the point of a stick well into a bullock's eye, and see the miserable wretch's visual organ wince under the infliction, is supposed by some sorry hounds to be quite a touch of grim humour.

Pigs are the only animals who seem to take things cosily, and let the world wag as it chooses. These, after being chevied round the yard in front of the auctioneer's rostrum

a few times, find their places again, and five minutes afterwards are fast asleep on their dirty straw, grunting placidly even as they slumber. A discontented man may learn a wonderful philosophical lesson by studying a pig in all its varied moods.

Crump and Snell proved to be harder nuts to crack than Joe counted upon. He had to give the thing up at last, inasmuch as they would not come to his terms, finishing by sticking out hard and fast for their own. It was good stuff, Joe argued, and he didn't like to leave it for Barclay, an opposition grinder of corn, to buy up, so that he determined to take Snell in to dinner, and treat him to a bottle of the good old fiery port that the Lion had in its cellars. Snell went, of course. A bit of a screw like Snell never missed a dinner that he had not to pay for, upon principle. The one bottle merged into two, and at last Joe, late in the afternoon, bought his corn very well. He made short work of Snell after that, wrote him a cheque there and then, had his mare brought round, and was off to his own fireside like an arrow from a bow.

It was a dark, gloomy evening, and the roads were none too good, so that, for the sake of the mare's knees, her rider had to pull up to a walking pace more than once, and by the time he got home it was close upon seven o'clock. His first question was for his wife.

'Mrs. Morton 'ave got the ponies out, sir, and she 'ave driven into the town to see her mother,' replied the town-bred girl, who was his wife's special handmaid.

'Is she driving herself?' next asked Joe, with a feeling of deadly anxiety pervading his whole mind.

‘No, sir ; missis ’ave taken one of the boys with her. She said, in case you came home first, that she should probably be late before she was back.

‘Ah ! very well. Order me some tea, will you ? Which of the boys has gone with her ?’ and Joe comforted himself with the reflection that she had probably gone to take counsel with her mother. What so likely ? ‘Why, hang it,’ he reflected, ‘she has taken Curly with her’—for he had been informed upon the point—‘a steady lad, too—expressly because she knows that I don’t like her driving after it is dark. And presently,’ he thought—‘oh, my darling !—you’ll come in to me, and ask me, pleadingly, with a little whimper—a tear, bright as a diamond, in the turquoise eyes—to forgive you your imprudence—and I don’t know, I don’t know,’ he soliloquized—‘she’s very young. Well, well, I’ll see about it.’

Joe had his tea—the time slipped by. Eight o’clock came, then half-past, and at last our soft-hearted miller put his pipe down, and began to fidget. It is by no means certain that a perusal of ‘Foxe’s Book of Martyrs’ by candle-light had improved the cheerful tone of his mind. At any rate it is quite open to question whether the inspection of sundry pictures depicting the exhilarating process of disembowelment, or the adoption of precautionary remedies against the minor evil of earache by pouring boiling oil into a gentleman’s ear, had done him any large amount of good. Certain it is that when nine chimed out, clear and distinct, from Alcaston Church tower, Joe trembled with nervous anticipation. Directly afterwards he heard the wheels of the pony-carriage grating down the gravelly road, and he

blushed like a schoolboy. She was coming, God bless her ! she was coming—the very core of his great heart, was the tenor of his inmost thoughts. Ah, yes, he would forgive her. Did not Christ say, ‘ Let him who is without sin cast the first stone ’ ? She would be in his arms in a moment more. The wheels stopped, and his heart panted painfully. His neck and face were suffused with rosy blood. ‘ God bless her ! she is coming,’ he murmured ; ‘ she is coming, my own darling wife ! And for my boy’s sake, I’ll forgive, and try to forget.’

He got up from his chair, and made two strides—two long strides, towards the door. He stopped with his eyes gleaming, his lips parted, and showing the white, strong teeth.

There was a confused murmur of people in hasty conversation. A low hum of many voices, in the midst the sharp, shrill cry of a woman. What did it all mean ? How his heart throbbed with the uncertainty. He could put up with it no longer, but opened the door, and strode along the passage to the kitchen, where the servants were gathered together like a flock of frightened sheep.

In their midst stood the lad whom they called Curly, with fear-blanced face, and tears streaming from his eyes. For a moment Morton stood silent, he regarding the group earnestly, and they, in their turn, looking at the floor or the great fire with averted eyes.

‘ What is the meaning of all this ?’ cried Joe at last, in loud, commanding tones. ‘ Come here, Curly, lad !’ and he laid his brown hand kindly on the boy’s shoulder. ‘ Now, then, what is’t to do, lad ? Thoo’ve never had an accident ?’

‘Oh ! master, master,’ wailed the boy, while he lifted his pale face streaming with tears. ‘Dunnot thoo hurt mey, master ; I could na help it.’

‘Speak, boy !’ cried Joe, hoarsely, while his own face, lately rosy red, became livid as that of a corpse. ‘Speak, I tell tha’, and let me know what’s to do.’

‘The mistress’—sobbed the boy—‘the mistress made me tak’ carriage to the railway station, and that man as you pulled out of pool yesterday—ar wish to th’ Lord thoo’d let ’im drown—met her and kissed her, and they’s gone ar dunno knows where by train.’

The unhappy man gave one long agonised cry. It was like the wailing scream of one in his last extremity. He tottered, and spread his arms out in mute, speechless misery. They ran to catch him ; kindly hands would have held him up, but he fell headlong, like a stricken deer pierced to the very heart by the hunter’s ball, and lay as one dead, with the seal of death, upon his ashen face.





## CHAPTER XXXII.

### ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE.’

A MESSENGER rode in hot haste from the mill to fetch Dr. Monckton. Fortunately the man met him on his way home from some sick bed, and the good doctor turned Brown Molly’s head instantly for Littlewash. When he got there, Joe was sitting up in his chair, evidently better, and told the doctor in such quiet tones about the cause and nature of his late seizure, that the little man, knowing somewhat of his friend’s excitable temperament, greatly marvelled.

‘You take this matter just as I would wish, Morton. It is useless to put yourself in a passion about it. No one can make the injury lighter,’ he said, in kindly, conciliatory fashion.

‘Doctor,’ responded Morton, in terribly calm, measured tones, ‘my dark hour is over. I am a ruined man, for from this moment I shall devote my life to avenging my injury. To-morrow I start for London—there is no train to-night—and if Hubert Welford is above the earth’s surface I shall find him. *When I find him I shall kill him.*’

‘And possibly swing for your own rashness.’

‘I care not, doctor. My heart is broken. God have



mercy on me ! my heart is broken, and I have naught in the wide world to care for now,' said poor Morton, in a broken, trembling voice.

'You forget your boy, my dear friend.'

'Nay, I don't ; bless his bonnie face. I am going to ask George Welford to look after him for a time. I start for London by the first train. God help that man if I find him !'

For an hour or more the doctor sat talking with his friend, trying all that he knew to divert Joe from his purpose. He might equally as well have tried to govern the rise and fall of the sea in its wrath, for Morton was just as stern and inflexible. Monckton appealed to him, for the boy's sake, to let matters take another course. Utterly useless ; Joe simply answered that he meant to kill Hubert Welford—that nothing should alter his determination. He meant to strangle him, said he, if he once laid hands upon him, even as he would crush the life out of a venomous snake. In his bitter, cruel grief, he was as hard and unyielding as a bar of iron. A blow had been dealt to him which had hardened his heart until it had become even like granite or adamant.

Monckton was just on the point of leaving him when the gallop of a horse hard ridden was heard. The animal was evidently coming straight to the mill, and in another moment a man's voice was heard outside, asking, in loud, eager tones, for Dr. Monckton.

Both men hurried out, and saw one of the railway porters, who had just descended from the back of a horse ridden simply with a halter on its head—a horse whose heaving flanks and expanded, quivering nostrils told at what a pace the animal had been pushed along.

'Oh, doctor !' cried the man, in ringing syllables, 'pray make haste and get to Brading Junction. A goods train has run into the night express, and they tell me the people are lying on the line dead and dying like sheep.'

'Merciful heaven ! and he and she are in it,' ejaculated Morton. 'Put the mare to, quick, men !' he shouted. 'Can we get from Alcaston ?' he asked the porter, in a breath.

'Yes, sir ; there's an engine and a carriage or two waiting for the doctor at the station. We sent at once for you, sir, and Dr. Meadows,' continued the man, addressing Monckton. 'I'm afraid it's an awful smash !'

Morton stood trembling from anxiety piteously. His hands shook like those of a palsied man, while the doctor, turning away and taking Joe's arm, said reverently, and with deep meaning : "'Vengeance is mine ; I will repay, saith the Lord."'

They drove off at an awful rate, Morton standing erect in the cart and exciting his fast mare with hand and voice to the very top of her speed. His hat blew off, but he heeded it not, and pushed his horse on to increased efforts. The doctor sat down amongst the straw in the bottom of the cart, thinking every moment that a terrible catastrophe must follow such recklessness. The jolts of the heavy cart as it sank in deep ruts banged and thumped the little man cruelly. It was useless to speak to Morton ; his blue eyes, wide open and flaming, were fixed on the mare's head ; his iron wrists kept her straight as a die. They rattled along the country roads with the speed of a fire-engine. They flew down the lane leading into the town, and clattered along the stony streets. Already groups of people were at the street corners,

and old Jabez Ardron stood bareheaded at his shop door, at which a little knot of people were discussing the terrible story. Morton shouted in loud, ringing tones, to such as stood in his way, and they scattered like sheep. Covered with foam, the mare galloped madly on, and up the incline to the station. At the door of the booking-office stood George Welford, who had ridden over direct from the hall upon receiving a message to the effect that an accident had happened to the mail train, and that it was known his brother Hubert was in it. Very scared and frightened looked George's handsome face in the dim lamp-lit office, as the doctor and Joe pushed their way in.

'Monckton, thank God you've come! What a fearful thing this is! They tell me that my unhappy brother is in the mail train!'

The little doctor, between the shaking he had had and his deep sorrow, could not speak; but Joe turned, and, holding out his hand to George with a simple gesture, said, looking him straight in the eyes:

'Yes, Mr. Welford; I'm afraid he is. If he's dead or dying I am sorry for him, for I think he is hardly fit to meet his God to-night. Do you know who is with him?'

Of course George answered in the negative, and Joe said, while a spasm of pain wrung his honest face:

'Then I'll tell thee. He's got my wife with him.'

'Your wife? What do you mean?'

'Just what I say, to my shame and sorrow,' answered Joe with a smothered sob. 'Hubert Welford has ruined me and mine for ever. All that I ever loved and cared for in this world is with him now, whether he's dead or alive.'

George never answered him, but stood transfixed with the enormity of his brother's sin. At this moment a man came up to tell them that the train was ready. The little party hurried into one of the carriages, another medical man, Dr. Meadows, joined them, and the engine directly afterwards steamed slowly out of the little station.

It was all too sadly true. Brading was once a mite of a place which had suddenly sprung into notoriety and a position in commercial life through the discovery of a bed of peculiarly rich red clay, a seam which turned out to be extremely valuable for pottery purposes. It was eight or nine miles from Alcaston, and its few inhabitants woke up one morning to find their village famous. Soon the whole complexion of the place was changed. Great factory chimneys belched forth columns of black smoke. The fires of innumerable kilns seemed at night to cast a ruddy glow for miles round. Hordes of workmen soon ran up houses in every direction, and, twelve months after the discovery of the clay-beds, Brading became quite a populous little town.

It was pitch dark, of course, when they reached the scene of the accident, but great fires had been lighted upon the banks, and, fed by the broken woodwork of the smashed carriages, the flames leaped high up in the brisk night-wind and spread a fitful, ruddy gleam upon all the horrible features of the scene. Somebody had blundered sadly, for a heavily-laden goods train had been sent down the little loop line from the centre of the clay works and factories just a few moments too late or too early, and at the very moment when those in charge were piloting the laden waggons over a little network of crossings, the mail train thundered up the

line, sweeping like an avalanche everything from its path.

Crashing through the opposing obstacle, the great engine reared partially upwards, and then toppled over. A terrible wreck ensued. The fore part of the train partially held its place on the line. About midway some couplings broke, so tremendous was the jolt and strain, and instantly swaying over, the carriages, with their shrieking, helpless inmates, were hurled down the sides of a steep embankment. It is impossible to write in detail as to the extent or completeness of the fearful scene of wreckage. Suffice it to say that the stout carriages were smashed just as so many pill-boxes would have been under the blow of a great hammer—that amongst the torn, dismantled doors, girders, and beams, riven and twisted into a thousand strange fantastic shapes, were lying human beings—dead, with the seal of a horrible death upon their still, white faces, and others whom merciless death had spared only to suffer tenfold agonies. Strong men, gentle women, and little tender children lay crushed and hampered under the fearful wreck. There were no loud screams, but sobs and subdued moans, expressive of the deadliest pain and suffering, were heard every now and then above the shouts of the workmen who, one and all, were labouring as though each was possessed with the strength of ten men to set the sufferers free from their grievous thralldom. One little shrill voice was heard every now and then amidst the darkness—and many a bearded navvy dashed a tear away at the sound—crying from somewhere among the tumbled-over mass of carriages for ‘a ’ittle dop of water, daddy ; give Georgy a ’ittle dop

of water.' Poor Georgy! poor little fellow! he might ask for his little drop of water for hours, and, perhaps, never get it.

One first-class carriage only had been toppled over the side of the embankment, and lay smashed entirely out of shape. A little puddle of blood dabbled one of the cushions. The workmen had left this, and gone on to the remains of the next, under which poor little Georgy lay, crying for 'a 'tittle dop of water' to a possibly dead or senseless 'daddy,' upon whose dulled ears the child's plaintive cry smote not, nor would ever sound again. A stiff-built, soldierly-looking man—the Brading station-master—stood, with a powerful lantern in his hand, directing the removal of some of the heavy beams and girders. At the child's cry his moustachioed lip quivered every now and then, while his voice sounded harsh and husky as he urged the men to renewed exertions.

George Welford and Morton had gone straight down the side of the embankment, leaving the two medical men to go on at once to a row of cottages on the opposite side of the line, to which it was said some of those who had been injured had been conveyed. The dead had been carried to the waiting-room at the station, and lay in a ghastly row upon the floor, covered with a tarpaulin, and waiting to be owned.

Joe tapped the station-master on the arm, and the official, turning round, at once put out his hand, knowing Morton well, saying in low tones, 'I trust in heaven as you've got none of thine in this awful night's work?'

'I am afraid so,' answered Joe with a shudder, which

shook his powerful frame from head to foot ; instantly afterwards adding, ' Here is Mr. Welford, of Alcaston. Have you seen anything of his brother ?'

' I don't know him, sir,' replied the man.

' Was anyone in the first-class carriage, yonder ?' asked Joe, after a moment's pause, and still addressing the station-master.

' Aye, there was, I am sorry to say. A lady and a gentleman.'

' What like was the—the—gentleman ?' asked Joe next, while his voice quivered, and every nerve and muscle in his body throbbed painfully.

' A youngish man—well bred, evidently. The lady was tall, and fair-haired.'

' They are both safe, I hope ?' said Joe, while a spasm of pain shook him from head to heel.

' The lady may be—she's badly hurt, though, poor thing. The gentleman is dead. He was crushed terribly. The whole weight of the carriage was on his chest, poor fellow.'

Joe grasped George Welford's arm in the darkness with hands that closed upon the limb with the power of a vice. He could say no more, and Welford put the next question as to where those who had been in the carriage had been taken to.

' The dead man lies up at the station ; the lady yonder, in one of them cottages.'

' My poor Lizzie—my poor silly wife !' moaned Joe, while scalding tears rained down his face. ' God help her ! I must go to her ;' and he began to stride up the embankment through the darkness.

'You cannot get that way, Mr. Morton ; you must come round by the station,' shouted Mr. Berry, the station-master, after his retreating form.

Joe stopped, and, coming back again, Berry explained to him that on the other side of the line a canal was in process of formation. Thus, with the station-master leading the way, they went up the steep bank along the destroyed line, and presently trod upon the deserted platform, on which their footsteps raised loud echoes as they walked. A distant shout and cheer from the workers behind caused them to halt for a moment, and Berry said :

'They've found the little lad, like enough. I pray God he's safe.'

At the door of the locked waiting-room they paused, and Berry asked if they would like to see the dead body that had been taken from the first-class carriage.

'You had better, perhaps, gentlemen,' he added, 'if it is likely to be anyone as you know.'

Welford nodded assent, and the officer turning the key, they were next instant in the presence of death. A tarpaulin was spread over some long, ugly-looking angular objects on the floor, and Berry, lifting one end very gently, said, lowering his lantern :

, 'I think this is him.'

Little doubt about it. There lay Hubert Welford, his face dabbled and clotted with gore, which had oozed out from his mouth. Horrible pain had distorted his features, his hands were tightly clasped in the last dreadful agony of a terrible death. Kindly hands had closed his eyes, while his head and chin were bound up with a white handkerchief.



‘It is my unhappy brother,’ said Welford, in broken, trembling tones, in reply to an inquiring gesture from Berry. ‘I suppose he was quite dead when he was found?’

‘No, sir, he was not. He was alive, and tried hard to speak, but when we got the timber off his chest—poor fellow! he hasn’t got a rib left whole—a great rush of blood followed, and he was dead in an instant.’

‘Horrible!’ groaned George, pityingly, while a cold sweat stood upon his forehead. ‘Cover his face gently, Berry. Oh, Hubert, Hubert!’ he cried, covering his face with his hands; ‘may Heaven forgive you your misdeeds!’

‘Amen!’ stammered Joe with a white, blanched face; ‘Amen! poor fellow! and may God forgive him as freely as I do.’

They shut the door of the waiting-room, and the station-master showed them the way, in the inky blackness of the night, to the group of little cottages. Nearly everyone held one or two shrieking, moaning victims of the dreadful accident, and it was some little time before either of the men could find Monckton. At last they stumbled across him, and the instant that they did so, Joe gasped out an inquiry as to his wretched wife.

‘I have just left her, my poor friend. Rely upon it all that is possible for me to do I have done.’

‘I know it, Monckton,’ assented Joe in a choking voice, which he tried hard to steady. ‘Now tell me, doctor—I can bear any ill news now—is there hope?—will she live?’

‘Her life does not rest with me, Morton—God holds it in His hands, and He will take it away, or spare it, as He thinks

wisest. She is terribly injured, and, if she lives, will be but a helpless cripple all her life.'

'Will she live, doctor? Tell me the truth, I pray you. I am a man, Monckton; do trust me this once,' he begged piteously.

The glow from the distant fire flickered on the doctor's kindly, good-humoured face; and, even in the uncertain light, the lines of heavenly pity shone out clear and distinct, as he answered:

'I do not think she can, my friend. Her life is numbered by so many hours of suffering. She is senseless now. When she recovers her senses, it will probably be only to die.'

'Can nothing be done?' cried Joe in a paroxysm of grief at the terrible sentence. 'Poor soul! she is so young to die like this. Welford, go and telegraph for Sir Henry Dixon. Oh God! there may be hope while we stand idly by.'

Monckton shook his head, but assented to the idea of the great surgeon coming down, while Welford turned back to the station to set the wires at work. Directly he had gone, Monckton led the way to one of the little cottages, and opened the front door.

A cleanly, motherly-looking woman rose up as they entered from where she had been sitting on a low, wooden settle close to a bright fire. The room was as clean as a new pin, the furniture simply of deal, but white as scrubbing could make it, while the walls were decorated with a few gaudy prints.

A bed had been hastily made up on one side of the room, and on this lay stretched all that was mortal of Joe's wife,

Her beautiful hair had been cut completely away from one side of her head to enable the medical men to dress a fearful wound stretching right across the temples. Her lovely face was dabbled with blood stains ; her fair neck and bosom heaved painfully and laboriously with every breath she with difficulty drew. A low moan of pain every now and then surged up to her delicate mouth, now warped and twisted with excess of suffering.

By the exercise of a mighty effort Joe controlled his overstrained emotions, and silently approached the bed. As he looked down upon the ghastly remains of the beauty he had prized so dearly—upon the agonised features of her who was more than life itself to him—stoicism gave way, and mighty sobs broke from his heaving bosom. Once again he compelled himself to silence. Lizzie's hand, on which her wedding-ring still gleamed from her taper fingers, lay stretched on the coarse coverlet, tight gripping a fold in the cloth. Kneeling, Joe bent his honest head over his wife's hand, and, kissing it gently as he would have kissed his sleeping babe's cheek, he prayed earnestly and silently for his loved one's life. The doctor, having other patients to attend to, slipped quietly out of the room, while the stillness of the cottage was unbroken, save by a low moan of pain from the suffering woman, and now and again a distant shout from the band of workers on the railway.

The hours sped by, yet Lizzie never stirred. Joe still knelt by her side, watching every breath she drew. Once her fingers closed over her husband's hand, and held it tight. Poor Joe ! he almost cried out in the intensity of his anguish at this simple action. Presently she stirred, and the

woman whispered to him that she was to take some stimulant which the doctor had left. Loosening the clinging fingers, Joe rose and gave her the medicine. As he did so she opened her glorious eyes, and looked full in her husband's face. It was a vacant, unmeaning stare, and he saw she did not know him. Then her eyes closed again slowly, as a spasm of pain flitted like the shadow of death's wing over the racked, tortured features.

Monckton came in again directly afterwards, and felt her pulse. He put her hand gently down, with that mute, peculiar gesture that says eloquently enough, coming from a clever surgeon, 'Abandon hope.'

Daybreak, and the sparrows began to twitter in the thatch. Grey, ghostly streaks of light shot upwards in the wintry sky, and made the humble room look still more unpretentious and poverty-stricken than it was. Morton had just given his wife another spoonful of the powerful stimulant and turned to put the bottle upon the table, when he heard a horrible choked whisper coming from the dying woman.

He nearly dropped the medicine-bottle in his surprise, and bent to catch the labouring, halting words gasped out from the pale, dry lips, with sad, broken utterance.

'I—want—I want—my—my—husband ?'

'Darling, I am here !' groaned Joe, choking with grief, and with tears streaming from his eyes.

Slowly the blue eyes opened—opened, and looked at Joe full in the face—a wistful, anxious, pleading gaze—and then she whispered :

'You—you—here—lift—me up, please, Joe !'

He lifted her gently in his strong arms, trying all he knew

to subdue his grief, although his great manly heart was well-nigh bursting, and laid her wounded head upon his shoulder. A terrible shudder ran through her frame, yet forcing herself round in the bed, and lifting her bruised arms until they rested on his broad shoulders, she gasped out :

‘ Joe, will you—kiss me—before I die ?’

‘ Oh, my darling !’ he wailed. ‘ Live, my own, for my sake ! Live, darling, and we shall be happier than ever !’

‘ Kiss me, Joe—quickly—oh, God !—Remember my—my baby—forgive me—for——’

A long, shuddering sigh, the breath rattled in her throat, the beauteous limbs were stretched feebly out, and he was alone with his dead.





## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### RUN OFF THE WINCH.

WITH heart humbled and spirit broken, Joe took home the shattered, bruised body of her whom he had loved with such devotion as only a true man gives to a woman once in his lifetime. Her funeral followed in due course, and the grief-stricken man stood alone by the side of the open grave long after her mother and father had both turned away. Blinding, scalding tears filled his eyes as he gazed down at the coffin-lid, with its simple plate, a barrier which hid the earthly remains of her for whom he would have shed the last drop of his blood. It was a graceful feeling—the act of a true and courteous gentleman—which had prompted George Welford to ask Morton's permission to follow the corpse of the erring woman to its last resting-place, and the request was proffered in such a manner that it was impossible for Joe to refuse it. Thus it happened that George was one of the last of the little crowd that lingered by the side of the open grave. Seeing poor Joe's utter misery and heart-broken sorrow, George approached him slowly, so that he might hear the sound of his footsteps upon the gravel

path, and touching him gently upon the shoulder, said in low subdued tones :

‘Come, my friend ; it is necessary that we leave now.’

Morton turned, and looking pitifully into Welford’s face, saw there only a reflex of the deepest compassion. It is possible that no other human being would have met with such prompt obedience as the outraged husband yielded to George. He cast one last lingering look into the yawning gulf, and then drawing himself proudly up, he dashed the tears away from his eyes, with singular impetuous action, and prepared to face the little crowd of gaping sightseers gathered round the churchyard gate.

‘Bears it bravely, don’t he?’ said a chattering woman, with her towzly head buried in an old woollen shawl.

Aye, he bore it bravely enough, but none knew save Joe himself what a canker-worm of grief and sorrow was eating at the very core of his great, brave heart—a heart true as steel, fearless enough to have faced a legion of enemies, and yet soft as that of a little child.

Of course the Alcaston good people pelted the erring woman’s name and memory with every description of verbal garbage. The village life was so quiet and uneventful that, what with all the phases of the terrible accident, and its accompanying publicity, gossip and scandal were kept afloat for months. It preyed so upon poor old Jabez Ardron that he determined to sell up his business, and shake the dust of Alcaston from his feet. His prim and practical wife, strengthened by advice derived from her spiritual comforter; the smug and Reverend Caleb Spool, would have done nothing of the kind. ‘Live it down,’ was her advice, given

with a toss of her head and an accompanying flutter of her smart cap ribbons. 'People must have butter and bacon, tea and sugar, and their money now is worth just as much as it was before.' Jabez admitted the fact, but the old fellow had got sadly shaky with a long course of libations made at the shrine of his favourite gin and water, and his evening glass of grog and pipe of tobacco at the George had become, through long usage, second life to him. Now, he said, 'people looked askew at him, and answered him short, and he'd be hanged if he put up with it.' So that sell he did, left the town, and went up to London, where six months afterwards he died. Of his wife little or nothing has been heard, save that she is 'a shining light' amongst the elect at an establishment of Little Bethelites, and has already had more than one offer from among the elders of the church, who have possibly heard that Jabez died worth a fairly decent little fortune, as times go. What the good lady may do in the emergency it is impossible to say. Knowing her as you and I do, reader, it is not a very hard verdict if I say that the elder, whoever he may be, will not get the best of a good bargain even if she does lend an attentive ear to his persuasions.

Lottie Ardron, the worthy grocer's second daughter, married uncommonly well, and is as happy as she well can be, with an attentive husband who adores her pretty face and thinks his little snuggerly at Hoxton one of the most charming homes in the world.

Turn we now to dear old Monckton. He is as fat and jovial as ever, and just as fond of beguiling a red-speckled trout or a keen-fanged pike to his doom. He has given up



a large share of his practice, and now only attends to some of his oldest patients or particular friends. Amongst these is sweet Mary Welford, who has given her loving husband a silky-haired rosebud of a girl to take the place of 'baby' *vice* the bonnie lad, now fast growing into a sturdy, thickset customer, and whose birth formed the opening event of our story. Since Hubert's sad death his aged mother has never been quite the same, and George watches the calm, peaceful face of the old lady with prying, loving eyes, either when he goes up to her room to give her her morning kiss, or when he meets her—a somewhat rare occurrence—at the table with the rest of the household. It may be that she is drifting slowly and surely to her own last anchorage, and if it is so depend upon it she is going as peacefully to meet her Creator as the summer suns sink down behind a rosy cloud to greet the night.

The greatest disappointment that old Tatham perhaps ever had in his life was when Clodhopper got beaten for the Derby. That he was beaten, and that, too, badly, there was no denying, and even the fact that he ran a clinking great race for the Leger, and only got beaten on the post by the shortest of heads, seemed to afford the old man but small consolation.

'He wor tried before t' Darby,' said the obstinate old fellow, one day to our friend Joe. 'Aye, and he won his trial with t'ould un like a real racehorse. And yet ar canna make it oot. He was cool and quiet as a cucumber i' th' paddock ; an' ma eyes and limbs, Joe, lad, it wor a blaazin' day. They wor all round him buzzin' like a hatful o' bees, for y'see, t'master, like a tom fool as he is, had a bleated out all aboot

his trial wi oud Geevanna, and what a high trial it was an' all, and they Loondon folks had gone weely nigh mad. There's a hoss, Mester Morton, now, ef you like. None like him i' the world—never was a better foaled than that oud Geevanna, no, nor dal mey buttons ef there ever will be. Aye, aye, well, wheer was I? I' th' paddock to be sure, and so I was. Damned ef they chaps didn't worry mey to death, and Patsy was as crooked as a bent sixpence, too. You never saw such chaps i' your born days, Joe. There was one on 'em, and he come to me, he did, au' he was all scented wi' summat, and smelt quite powerful. Aye, an' the collar o' his shirt were so mortal stiff he could na move his neck. T'chap had got a luvly rose in 's button-hole, an' it brought back my bit o' a place, an' the roses round th' porch, an' du you know, ar quite hankered arter th' flower. Says he, comin' up to me wi' a sort o' broken-backed crawl, says he, "Ma man, that's a niceish colt o' yourn," an' ar says, "Aye, ma lad," says I, "theer's wuss, ar'll be bound." "He's vary fit too," says he, stickin' a piece o' glass in 's eye, and lookin' colt over fra' his yed to h's heels. "Aye, he's clean in an' out," says I, "and that's more than soom on 'em here can say." Then he cooms a creeping round to mey as I was a muzzlin' and playin' wi' Clodhopper's bit, and says he, "Now, ma man, you can win a goodish stake if you like. Shall ar back the colt to win mey a coople o' moonkeys?" Drat the man! ar didn't know what he meant by a coople o' moonkeys, so ar ses to him, "Ma lad," says I, "you can back him to win you a coople o' Bengal tigers and a Injey-rubber hellyfunt or two ef you like." "But you don't take me," ses he; "shall I stand the colt, now, to win me a raker?" "Ma

lad," says ar—and ar looks him straight in 's face—" ar never gives nobody a tip aboot any o' my hosses without gettin' someat for th' inf'rimation." "Ha coorse not," says he, "what shall ar put you on?" "You shall put mey nothin' on, mey lad," says ar, "but if you'll give me that rosebud as you've got i' thy coat, ar'll tell you to th' best o' me knowledge." "Rum old cuss," says he to himself. "But, however," says he, "there's th' rosebud, and now what shall I do?" "Don't do nothin'," says ar; "we mout win, it's true, ef two or three on 'em was to break their necks i' runnin', but ma own belief is we shall get beaten to blazes." "You think so, really," says he, and ses ar, "Ar du"—and ar'm hanged ef the tip didn't come off.'

'But,' said Joe, 'I cannot quite understand now how it was that he got beaten so badly. You had tried him very highly, had you not?'

'Ar never tried one higher, an' ar thought the form was good enough to win forty Derbys,' echoed Tatham, with a sigh. 'But, Patsy tells me, when it coom to the absolute racin', and he asked him to take his place and keep it, after they coom round Tatten'am Corner, the colt shut up like a mouse an' he would'na try another yard.'

'Aye,' said Joe, with a weary sigh, as his thoughts flitted sadly back to his dead wife, and of that terrible race for dishonour in which both she and her tempter had been 'beaten on the post'—'he was tried and found wanting like a good many more of us in this world, Tatham. Well, never mind, we shall win a big handicap with him some day, and that will make up for the disappointment.'

Three years have rolled swiftly by, and the tall grass waves green over Lizzie's grave in the quiet God's acre of the old churchyard. It is a glorious summer's morning, and the scent from the distant hay-fields, mingled with that of dog roses hanging in great pinky sprays from the hedges, hangs heavily on the sweet, fresh air.

A man—with a film of silver threads in his hair—and a woman are standing close to Lizzie's grave, and the firm sonorous voice of the man sounds somehow strangely familiar, as he puts a question to his companion. A stout, well-grown boy clasps the woman's hand tightly, as, half awed with the still quiet of the place, he seemed to shrink from going nearer the grave, upon which his father had just placed a bunch of glorious summer flowers.

'And now, Mary,' asked the man, the full rich tones of his voice quivering slightly, 'standing here by his mother's grave, will you promise me, love, to do your best for her child?'

'God helping me, I will, Joe, to my dying hour.'

One word more of explanation, or the reader will think I have left him in the dark. They were Joe Morton—merciful to the last—and Mary Dacre.

**THE END.**





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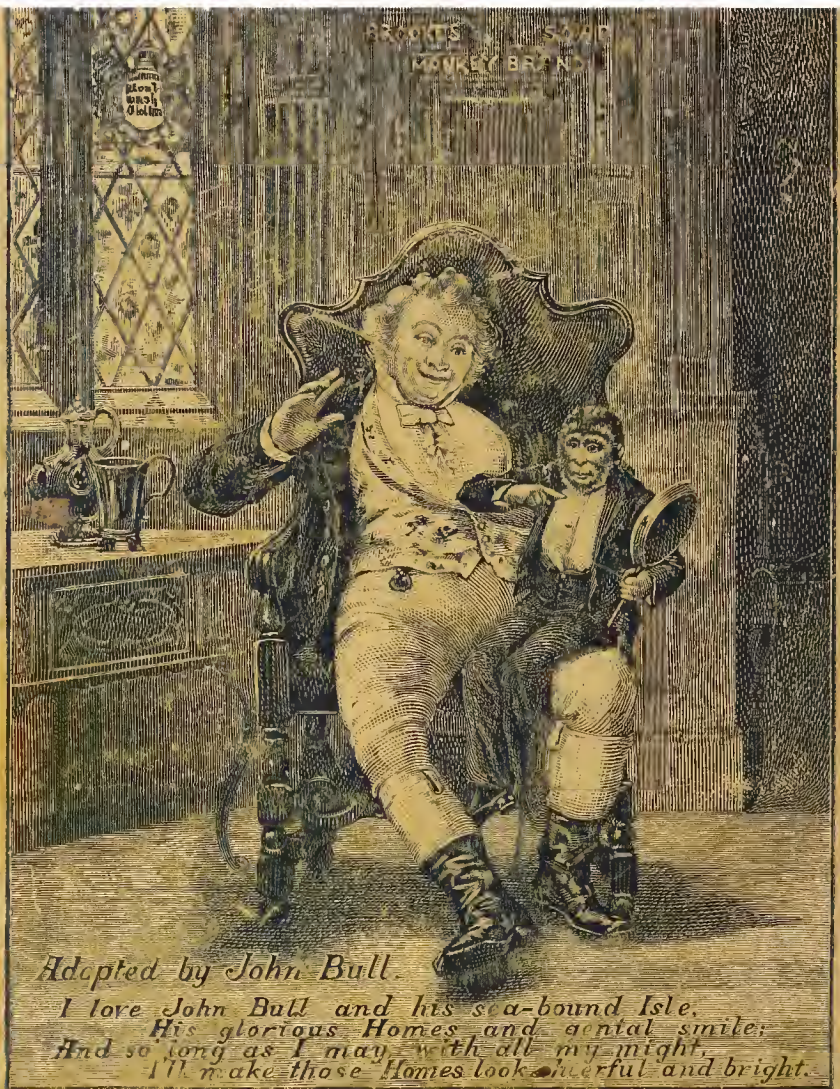


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